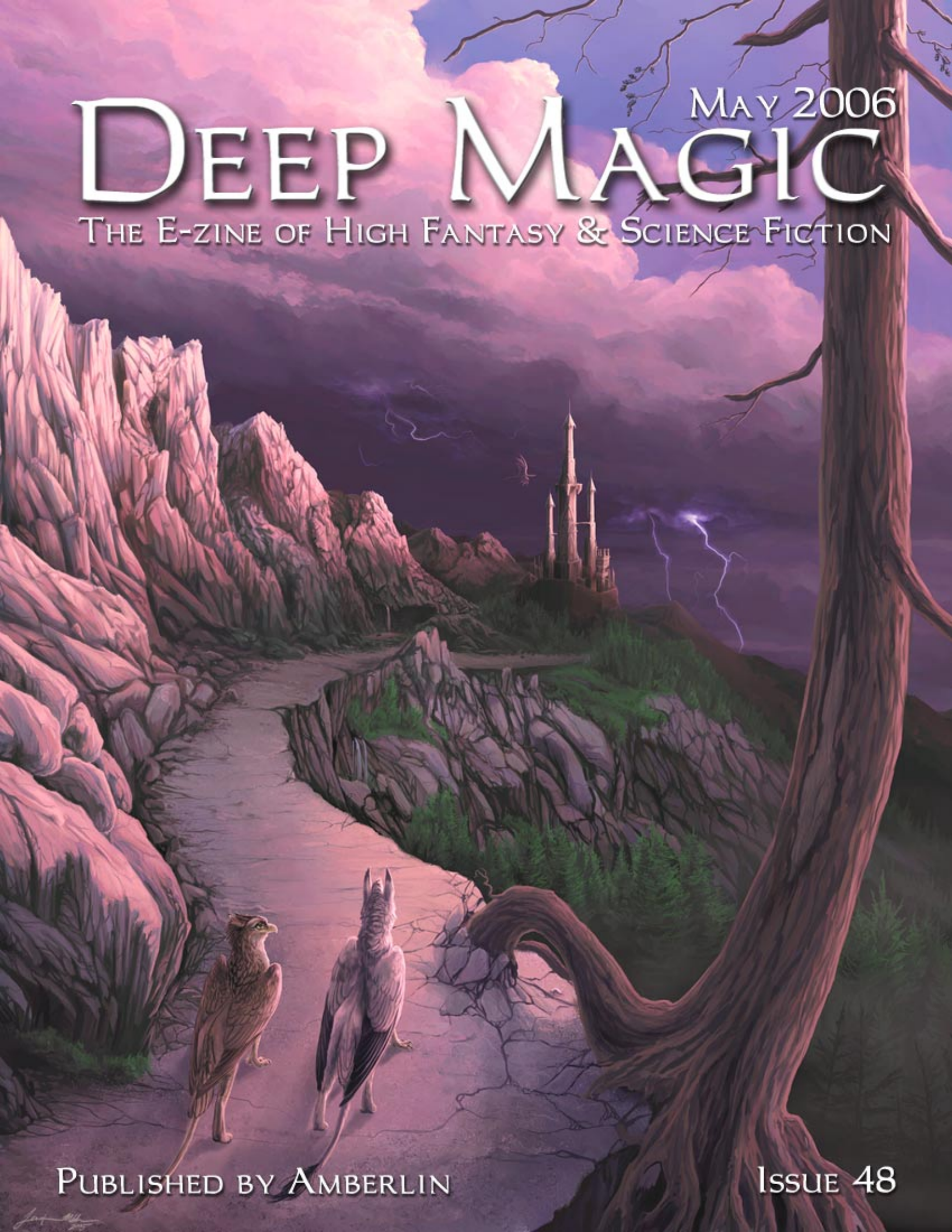
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May 2006

It's hard to believe, but this issue completes our fourth year of Deep Magic. I wasn't sure we'd see four years, but it's been a great ride. And this month will, hopefully, be the beginning of an even greater future; however, we'll need your help. As we did last May, we are having a subscription drive, and our goal is much higher. You see, we at Deep Magic won't be satisfied until we are a professional e-zine, paying professional rates. We hope to take another large step in that direction. Go to the subscription drive page in this issue for details.

For the rest of this month's issue? We can now announce the winners of the 2006 Lamp Post Awards. See the next page for the results. I have also awarded an Editor's Choice. I don't know that it garners much prestige with anyone, but I still think it's well deserved. Be sure to drop by the forums and leave a note for all the winners. We had a great group of finalists, so all were truly deserving.

We also have another great batch of stories: *Last Ditch* by Jason Gross, *Bond* by Joanne Anderton, and *Kindred Spirits* by Aliette de Bodard. Jennifer Miller provides our cover art this month with The Road Before Us. Brandon Sanderson, author of Elantris (last month's Editor's Choice book review), has also written a fantastic writing craft article for us entitled "Narrative Soup or How I Turn Ideas Into Books." Don't miss it.

Thank you all very much for getting Deep Magic to the four-year mark. We could never have done it without all of you. We hope to keep things moving toward our ultimate goal. Be sure to read the subscription drive page for the scoop. And thanks again.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Whitted
Chief Editor
Deep Magic

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

The Lamp Post Awards

The voting is complete and the results tabulated. You, our readers, have picked your favorite stories and artwork from the last eighteen months of Deep Magic. Without further ado, here are your 2006 Lamp Post Award winners:

Fantasy Short

Jodhin by Q. S. Archer

SciFi Short

Hunting with Flinteye by Sean T. M. Stiennon

Cover Art

Prophecy ~ Yris by Aleski Briclot (September 2004)

Editor's Choice

Simon Kewin ~ author of A Sorcerous Mist and The Final Machine

Honorary Lamp Post Award

Anne M. Stickel

As editor of Deep Magic, I also wanted to offer two additional recognitions. The first is that of Editor's Choice. Over the years of Deep Magic, I have seen many excellent authors who have submitted their stories to our publication. This is my way to recognize a story or author of my chosing. The 2006 Lamp Post Awards selection for Editor's Choice is Simon Kewin. Simon had two stories nominated for the awards: A Sorcerous Mist (fantasy) and The Final Machine (scifi). Both stories evoke the essence of what I have always invisioned Deep Magic to be. He created worlds of imagination with stories that were beautiful, fantastic, well-written and, of course, suitable for fans of all ages. Congratulations, Simon.

The second award is an Honorable Lamp Post Award, which the staff nominated and would like to present to Anne M. Stickel. Throughout the years of offering our Writing Challenges, Anne has not only submitted challenges nearly every month, but hers have consistently been of excellent quality and one the staff looks forward to reading every month. So on behalf of all the staff, thanks for your participation, Anne, and congratulations!

Annual Subscription Drive

Back in June 2002, Deep Magic was born. The support of our readers and our dedicated staff of volunteers has kept us growing since that time. At the end of May in 2002, we had around 90 subscribers to our mailing list. Now we have over 1400. In the beginning, we had hundreds of downloads a month. Over the last publishing year, we've had over 19,000 downloads. We would like to keep the momentum growing, and the only way to do that is with your support.

The greatest benefit from supporting Deep Magic is the tremendous satisfaction you feel in helping making this a valuable resource to writers and readers all around the world. The only source of funding our expenses is member support. You are so important to us! The funds we receive during our pledge drive primarily determine how many issues we will be able to publish during the year.

Goals for 2006!

Last year, we started paying our artists and authors a flat rate of $25 for their work. At Deep Magic, we would love to attract even better talent to our pages. A year ago, we took a leap of faith in our readers to support this strategy, and it worked out great. We gained enough contributions and enough new paid memberships to pay the bills last year. The decision to pay our authors and artists resulted in our submissions going up enormously. We were flooded with more and higher quality submissions. Thanks to our resident computer geek Steven for automating the submission process, we survived the deluge. So in 2006, we're going to lay it on the line again with three goals.

Goal #1: Double author and artist payments
Goal #2: Make each issue bigger
Goal #3: Add more premium content

Starting in June 2006, we plan to double the payment for our authors and artists - **$50**. And we would like to squeeze one more story in per issue and provide new premium content that only paying members get access to.

This means **we need at least 150 paying members this year**. For those of you who have been enjoying Deep Magic for free, isn't it time to finally be a member? If you keep coming back month after month to read great new stories, articles, book reviews, and interviews with the best in the genre, as well as many of the debut authors, it is time to make a commitment. Look at it this way:

Why become a member?

For the price of one hardback novel (even a discounted one at Amazon, if you're frugal like us) you get a lot:

- Seven serialized novels
- Over 1300 pages of short stories

- Interviews with Guy Gavriel Kay, Steven Erikson, Carol Berg, George RR Martin, Robert Jordan (to name a few)
- Articles from Robin Hobb, Cecilia Dart-Thorton, David Farland, Terry Brooks, Mike Stackpole, Naomi Kritzer, Greg Keyes (and many more)
- The satisfaction that you've helped there be more "safe places for minds to wander"

You will also get access to premium content:

- Deep Magic Special Editions (annual issues made up of stories from invited authors just for you)
- E-books: starting with ***Wrath of Aster***, the sequel to Jeff Wheeler 's fantasy novel, as well as the original ***Tears of Minya***. (Posting date TBA.)

Discount

Special discount: **If you pay for a membership during our pledge drive (May through June 2006), you will get a 20% discount off the regular $25 membership. If you currently have a paid membership that hasn't expired, you can sign on for another year with the discount.**

Membership Benefits

- Access to all back issues of Deep Magic
- Access to our Member's Only Premium Content: Special Edition issues and eBooks
- Your own web log (or 'blog ') on the Deep Magic boards

Since we are a non-profit company, we accept donations of any amount. Your support helps us pay our authors and artists for their work, pay the webhosting fees we incur running such a large website, and pay for software upgrades that are critical to running the e-zine. None of our staff is paid (unless we publish one of their stories). So the amount of memberships and contributions we receive during this pledge drive will directly determine how many more issues and stories we will be able to publish over the next year.

To pledge your support for Deep Magic, you can join with a membership through our message boards. You can also make a donation of any amount through Paypal to this address: pledge@deep-magic.net.

Thank you!

The staff at Deep Magic

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

May 2006 Writing Challenge
Entries due June 10, 2006

Writers are storytellers at heart and how one tells a story is quite a craft. A device that writers often use is employing a narrator to share the story. This can be done through first person, but it can also be done through third person. And since most people only see the good in themselves, even a true villain can sound sympathetic to himself. Your challenge this month is to create a narrator who unwittingly reveals, through many subtle ways (language, details, contradictions, prejudices), that their judgment is too subjective and cannot be trusted as fact. If done successfully, your reader will begin to doubt what they are being told and try to piece together the facts on their own. Make it a brief scene and keep it to 500 words.

Selections from the March 2005 Challenge

Magic-Debt
Minlay
Survival Training

The above stories were selected from the March challenge, which was to use a dream or nightmare as inspiration for a story.

Don't forget the April challenge due May 10:

We all experience a gamut of emotions as we go through our lives. Over the period of a week or so, write down ten things that made you angry or pleased you, but do not try to explain why. Be specific because that makes it more realistic. Close observation of your immediate world is a good source of fiction and helps to develop a sense of detail. With your list of ten events, choose one or more of them and incorporate them into a scene or story. Remember, the more precise the detail, the more realistic is becomes. Try it out and keep it to 500 words.

Magic-Debt

By Derek Ott

The conclave of eyes made Martik squirm within the wooden chair he was seated upon. His fidgeting caused the joints to creak and groan, sending echoes from the rickety chair to reverberate across the poorly lit room. The two burly guards, Not Too Smart and Even Less Smart labeled by Martik in thought, appeared to narrow their focus on him more, but it was tough to detect movement in their beady little eyes. *Largiant street thugs*, decided Martik, *curses to the new Coalition for letting these overseas mercenaries develop a foothold in the city!* He had heard some Largianese had recently filtered into the city and started up a clan, most likely offering illicit services that their type of intelligence level typically engaged in. As with most Largianese, these two towered close to three meters and wore their standard leather, sleeveless jerkin to expose the bulging muscles on arms that enforced their brand of law. Shaved heads and an angled scar on the left cheek also marked the clan's insignia. Martik mused how to entice Even Less Smart to question Not Too Smart on the chain of command, such as why did he always have to stand on the right side, but then concluded that his current less-than-two meter height was better than less-than-one meter.

Martik would have wasted time glancing about the room, but it was futile; blank wall to his back, his wobbly chair, a small table before him, and then the two Smarts with the only entrance between them. Or in Martik's case, the only exit. The two candlesticks on the table infused a shadowy enhancement to the room. Martik considered performing some various shadow animals on the walls, but then figured his only appreciative audience would be himself. Martik sighed and waited, but only after resolving that creaking his chair some more might liven the mood. It didn't.

His wait lingered for perhaps a half-day. His daydream of Amelia, the local tavern server, was snapped back to reality by sharp raps at the door. A double-rap, single-rap, and then another double. The outline of the door gleamed with yellow light and then swayed open. In walked a short figure of a wizened man, clad in a black robe with a gnarled staff in one hand. *No*, thought Martik, *he's floating*. White tufts of hair protruded from his head and a droopy look suggested a man of slow wit accompanied by possible eyesight loss. Martik knew better. Power incarnate ebbed from this dangerous man.

"Nice to see you had great confidence in me," said Martik. "Enough so to place a spell on the door." Martik glanced at the Smart twins to see no variance in their posture with a new presence in the room.

"Tsk, tsk, Marty. It was merely there to prevent you from taking a break to drain a keg at a nearby tavern causing you to forget our important meeting," said the wizard as he seated himself on a cushion of air since Martik claimed the only chair in the room. "Of course, not to say my large friends couldn't keep you at bay."

Showing off as usual, thought Martik. "You know that I hate the name Marty."

"And I will call you *dog* if it so pleases me," said the wizard. "In fact, I think it does. *Dog*, do you have my payment?"

Martik could have sworn Even Less Smart snickered, but hard to make out in the

dimness. Martik made a mental note of who to add to his hit-list. "I have it, wrapped in last night's finest linen conquered from another female admirer." Martik exposed from within his robe's sleeve a small wrapped object.

Taking the small package, the wizard laughed with pity. "If that were the case, Marty, you would be lapping in some rich widow's luxury instead of owing me your life. How is your Magic-Debt today? Are the pores of your skin, the pores of your soul, aching for another fix? How are you able to breathe another moment? Well, *Dog*?"

Martik glared at the wizard. His fists clenched and his teeth grated. He would love nothing better than to act on his instincts and place the old fool into his grave. However, Martik lacked the ability at this point to engage in a maelstrom of conjuring, and even when his Magic-Debt would return to full capacity, he would be lucky to land a slap across the codger's balding skull. Martik made a sneer. "Do you have it?"

"Of course, Marty, of course. I own you, you owe me, you deliver to me, and I deliver to you. Your addiction is all I need to know that somehow you will come through for me each time. Perhaps late, but faithful enough like an obedient *Dog*."

Martik watched the wizard hand-gesture and materialize a small green vial between his fingers. Martik lunged after the vial and clutched his prize greedily as the wizard smiled at his exuberance. The cap flipped off the vial and Martik hastily swallowed its contents. He tossed the vial to the floor, shattering it, and leaned back in his chair with eyes closed, breathing deep.

"Ahhhhhh, *Dog*. Magic-Debt is a wonderful thing for those who need. It's even more wonderful for those who don't. Goodbye, Marty. I'll inform you of your next goal when your magic levels near depletion. Soon enough I would wager." The wizard was already floating on his way out, chuckling, with the Smart twins in tow.

Martik watched through the open door as they left his view, letting his eyes adjust from the stream of daylight coming in from the alleyway. "It's Martik, you dolt," he said to no one. Martik rubbed his face in shame and slumped in his chair to ponder his recurring obligation.

Minlay

By Steck

There was no sky to be seen.

A dense fog bounded his world and a smell of freshly turned earth filled the cold air. He stumbled across the uneven ground, knowing that he must not slip and lose his balance.

Half a dozen yards in front of him was the low block of sandstone he had to reach.

A mournful trill came through the fog, sounding close in the damp air. He looked to his left and saw the bare limbs of a black-wood tree. The Soul-eater, a little ball of black and white feathers sitting on a naked branch like a malignant growth, cocked its tiny head with the blood-red beak and looked straight at him.

One hand went automatically to his rapier, the other to the little amulet on the leather cord around his neck. The one Eira had given him, weeping silently and praying that the small piece of lapis caught in its cage of twisted silver strands would protect him in the Far-off.

But he knew that the blade was broken, a stump a mere hand's breadth long, and the tiny sky-blue stone had escaped its prison, taking with it all the luck he should have had. The tattered silver filaments were now no more than a memory of light and love.

He had to hurry. He had to reach the gravestone.

His worn boots slipped on wet stones poking through the earth like yellowed bones.

The Soul-eater started his song again, every trill shaving a heartbeat off the time left.

His knees trembled, his thighs ached and the shrill song of the bird cut through his head, mocking him: You will not make it. You will be too late. Too late. Too late…

With rasping breath and thudding heart he covered the last feet to the moss-covered stone.

There was no moss the last time, he thought, as his fingers tore at the thick green growth. Blood from a torn fingernail left a bright red trace on the uncovered surface. He pushed a hand deep into the moss, questing for letters cut into the stone. Where they should have been the stone was smooth and cool.

Still empty. Still empty.

Relief cut through him like a wave of warmth. He sagged against the naked stone and looked toward the black-wood. The bird had stopped singing.

He threw a handful of moss at it.

"Not too late, you bastard, not too late. Not too late." A chuckle, weak as a wheeze, escaped his lips.

The bird spread tiny black wings and swooped off.

He closed his eyes and felt the wetness of the earth below him, the cold hard stone against his back and the crumbling sheets of moss between his fingers.

"Captain! Captain!"

A hand shook him roughly. He struggled up, steadying himself against the smooth cold metal of the cannon he had rested against. The deck was awash with thick spray from the rough sea. The remaining mast stood against the racing clouds like a withered skeleton. Two sails flapped in the cold wind like tattered shrouds.

His men stood against the backboard rail, lined up like so many scarecrows against the backdrop of the hard grey cliffs of home.

He pulled the tarred sheepskin closer around his shoulders, closed his jaws against the feverish chatter of his teeth and crossed the heaving deck.

The silence of the men closed around him like a blanket.

Across the dark waters of the firth, Minlay came into view.

The fallen roofs had left timbers jutting like black ribs from the soot-stained carcasses of the high, narrow houses. Only the wind moved through the streets, stirring the ashes again and again.

The broken windows looked onto the choppy waves like empty eyes, accusing him of being too late. Too late.

He gripped the rail and looked back with eyes burning, but empty of tears.

The fleet of the red war-boats had been faster.

And a Soul-eater never left but with a full belly.

Survival Training

By A.M. Stickel

"The key to survival is vigilance…" began our instructor, Q-Namh. All of my Ivorti cohort strained forward, their attention riveted upon the Learned One, who continued, "In this terminus of your initiation, you will prepare…or die, Initiates."

At Q-Namh's signal, each one of us reclined upon our mats. Next, we felt the tendril-nodes he slipped into place within us. Quiet and darkness came, and then our descent to the multi-spectrumed planetary surface. Our cohort landed running, the sand under our limb-pads slowing our progress as we sank into it.

As First, I opened my orfactra to conduct the agreed-upon signal to the next link in the cohort. When no signal emerged, the teaching of Q-Namh sang to me, "magnetic impairment, due to a strong planetary field."

Mind-to-mind, we sang, "I open," and scattered ourselves across the sandy surface in a random pattern. The glory of an atomic unfolding warmed our shells so gently that those Ivorti melting into dust in our rearmost ranks hardly felt their cessation.

I knew better than to turn, so united with the occuception of those Ivorti who, one by one, sang, "I depart," and ceased, their dust becoming one with the universe.

Here and there, across the planet's barren expanse, columns of light and heat radiated outward on atmospheric vortices that spiced the planet with a concussion of ionic perfume, converting soft sand to hard density.

"I fly," I sang, and those Ivorti remaining in the cohort responded in kind, mind-to-mind. We rose in violent upwellings, our strong bodies bypassing the ashy emanations of the planet's fragile beings as they disintegrated.

Below us, the surface underwent molecular epiphany, and we circled to alight upon sand once more. The atmosphere had descended, emptying into an unusual configuration, where a large portion of the sky itself lay quivering before us, compressed.

Strangeness towered at a distance, its surge seducing us towards oblivion. It almost drowned my song, "I run." The sand sucked at our limb-pads; exhausted from flight, we instinctively stretch-stepped toward higher planes, away from the deepening trough.

"If you fear this place so much, why have you come here?" sang the planet Guardian.

"I came because I was called to serve the Race," I replied to my immortal challenger for the entire cohort. "Q-Namh, my Limits instructor, sent me."

"If you have come to live…or to die, do you really know why?" sang the Guardian.

"Ivorti are the hope of the Race," I sang. "The Race is the inheritor of this universe, where all that was will be renewed and perfected. When we have served our purpose, we are permitted cessation. For, to cease is to begin…"

"Then run no more, Ivorti, but bide beneath the strangeness until you cease," sang the Guardian, its occuception enwrapping mine.

"I am unworthy," I sang, now bereft of my cohort contact, aware of the approaching strangeness which had overtaken them looming ever larger in the glitter of the Guardian's occuceptors.

Before the strangeness could crush me into itself, quiet and darkness came, and then,

withdrawal of the tendril-nodes and Q-Namh's welcome: "Remember, First and Last, who of all your cohort have survived, that when you descend to a planet, the Guardian awaits. For the sake of the Race, you must continue to prepare, my Ivorti."

Filled with the bitter tang of the Guardian's strangeness, I respectfully entwined my quaking forelimbs within Q-Namh's, acknowledging my responsibility as an Initiate who had tasted and yet accepted my end.

Last Ditch

By Jason Gross

Borne entered the empty tavern, bringing a smile—quickly hidden—to Sandor's face. The mayor of Last Ditch rarely came to the tavern, and then for only one reason. Sandor appeared to take no notice of the mayor. He continued cleaning mugs until Borne sat down at the bar and cleared his throat.

"Oh, good morning, Borne. What can I get you?"

"Morning, Captain. I guess I'll choke down one of Allie's homebrews. Is it any good today?"

"No." Sandor filled a clean mug from the nearby tap. He passed the mug to Borne, who sniffed at the dark brown liquid.

"Smells terrible," he noted.

"Yes, it does. Gets you drunk though, which is all that matters around here."

Borne raised the mug to Sandor, then drank. "Gods, it's awful." He winced.

Sandor shrugged but said nothing. He'd let the mayor come around to business in his own time. It was never good to appear too anxious, especially when it came time to negotiate.

Borne took another drink. "I never understood why you waste your time in this tavern, Sandor. With the coin you make, you shouldn't need to work in between trips."

"Idle hands, idle minds, mayor. It keeps me busy. I could just spend my coin in the vaj-house, but what's the point of that?"

> **It's what you bring back that's more important, though. We need medicine. Sealskin blankets. Boots. Seeds. Most of our grain crop was wiped out in that windstorm last month.**

"I suppose." The mayor looked around at the common room. The stone tables were all empty, and the hearth was cold. "Quiet here today."

Sandor just smiled at Borne's feeble attempt to make more small talk, and then a long silence ensued. Borne sipped at his ale, while Sandor continued wiping down the mugs.

Finally, Borne slammed down his half-empty mug in frustration. "Dammit, Captain, you win. I don't have all day to sit here and play games. You know why I'm here."

"I guess I do. Late in the season for a caravan, though, isn't it?"

Borne scoffed. "The storm season won't begin for another six weeks. Plenty of time to make it to Stonespur and back. Even for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." With wide-eyed innocence, Borne took a drink, then added, "Just that Alaine made his last trip in thirteen days."

Sandor knew better than to rise to the bait, but he couldn't resist. "Alaine is a fool," he snapped. "Worse than that, he's dangerous. He pushed his team nearly to death on that trip. For what? Just so he could trim off two days and boast about it? You know I'll get your caravan through."

"I know. That's why I'm here talking to you, and not dragging Alaine out of the vaj-house.

continued on page 27

"Narrative Soup" Or How I Turn Ideas Into Books

By Brandon Sanderson

Part One: Definitions

One of the most common questions that authors get has to be "Where do you get your ideas?" Though some authors apparently get annoyed by the question, I've always found it to be a very good one. What is more pertinent to the writing process than the very foundation of a novel, the formation of ideas? I think understanding how certain authors construct stories can not only help beginning writers, but also help old pros by showing them the process from a different perspective.

And so, I'd like to try and tackle this somewhat overwhelming question. One thing to understand about writing, however, is that there's no one way to do it. I'm going to explain what I do, as best I can. Hopefully, seeing my process will help those who read this article—though they certainly shouldn't expect their own process to perfectly mimic my own!

As I consider this topic, another important thing occurs to me. That is a simple, but somewhat daunting fact: That ideas are the easy part. Most authors I've met express this same sentiment, and I've certainly felt it myself. I have far more ideas than I can use. As a writer, I've trained myself to always be looking for ideas in the world around me. In fact, on my blog at brandonsanderson.com, I post a couple of story ideas every week, just to keep myself fresh. (If you're having trouble getting started, my blog might be a place to visit for a story prompt.)

Now, as I've explained, I have a lot of ideas. The good ones are the ones that stick in my head, and keep coming back. However, one thing I notice about newer writers is that they often latch onto a single idea and try to make a novel out of it. So, let me enforce something very strongly here: One idea, no matter how brilliant, does not make a novel! One idea probably won't even make a short story. I'd say that a novel needs at least six, a short story at least two. The numbers will differ, but the thing to keep in mind is that you can't generally carry a story on just one concept.

I split ideas into three general sections. There are plot ideas, character ideas, and setting ideas. I look for at least one good character idea per viewpoint I'm going to do. A character idea is usually a motivation, which often relates to a character arc. Where is this character going, and what will they accomplish? Plot ideas generally come in the form of general frameworks. You may have heard that there are only a few basic 'plots,' which is, in a way, true. However, what I look for here is a new twist on a plot structure. I usually try to combine a couple of these for a novel. The final type of idea, for me, relates to setting. These come in the forms of interesting visual paradigms, or in the forms of interesting magic systems. This is the place where I tend to get the most 'crazy.' Plots and characters are fairly archetypal—but setting is where science fiction and fantasy really shine. You can do some very interesting things here, and I encourage people to be as original as possible in this area.

Part Two: Synergy

Okay, so we've established that before I start a novel, I have a bunch of random ideas bumping about in my head. Some character ideas, some magic system ideas, some plot hooks, some images of interesting climactic scenes, and some visuals of interesting settings in which to tell a story.

For me, a novel begins when two of these ideas bump into each other in my head. I look at the two ideas I've had separately, then see how they influence each other. I think "What would happen if these two ideas happened in the same story?"

For example, I'll start putting characters together, and see if their separate climaxes/ motivations rub each other in interesting ways. I'm looking for compliments, though this doesn't necessarily mean characters who will get along well. Often, the best characters to put together in a story are the ones who react best against one another. At this point, what I'm looking for are characters who are interesting alone—but MORE interesting when I consider them in the same story.

The same works with plot and setting. If you add characters in your head into one of the plots you've been working on, how does that character change? Do their motivations combine in an interesting way with the conflict and tension of the plot idea? What about the magic systems? If you place one of those with a character, what does it do to the character?

Plots can mix together to form very interesting ideas as well. If you mix two plot tensions, will combining them make complimentary storylines or not? In a novel, I think it's important to have a nice mix between smaller level plotting and large, macroscopic plotting. Don't mix two plots that are so distinct and separate that the reader feels like they're reading two books. (Though, it can be a very interesting method of storytelling to start with what seems like two separate stories that begin to interweave and affect one another. This is, essentially, what I did in ELANTRIS.)

Eventually, these thoughts in my head will start to stick together. Like water droplets running into each other and combining, some ideas will get so intermixed that it's tough to pull them back apart. Some characters will begin to grow together in my head and become one person; others will stick together, and the way I regard them will become dependent upon their relationships with the other characters.

This is the beginning of a book. When these ideas work so well together that they become inseparable, I know I've got something good. Ideas are easy—but combining them together, then actualizing them on the page, THAT'S what is difficult. When I have six or so ideas, as mentioned before, that are working really well together, I know I've got a novel.

Part Three: Examples of Plot Synergy

All right, now that I've explained the process, let me see if I can show an example of the generation process that led me to the book that I'm releasing in July. It's called MISTBORN, and I've rarely had a set of ideas come together as well as they did for this book.

Let's start with plot, since I think the plot ideas were the foundation of my wanting to write this particular novel. In MISTBORN's case, I can trace my plot ideas directly back to plots that I experienced through other media. That happens quite a lot with writing, I think. Since plots themselves are reused a lot, a lot of my plot ideas come from reading about a historical event, or watching a movie, and thinking "That's interesting. But what if THIS happened

instead?"

In the case of MISTBORN, I was actually thinking about two separate plot frameworks. The first is the one that Tolkien used in Lord of the Rings. Those of you who read fantasy will be familiar with this archetype—the 'everyman' hero who gets thrust into a fantastical world, has a large burden of responsibility placed on him, and who has to defeat a much more powerful foe. In fantasy, this usually manifests as a farmboy who goes on a quest to find/destroy a magical item and defeat a dark lord.

I've never really wanted to use this particular archetype. The truth is, it's terribly overused in fantasy. There are authors who have done this one very, very well, and whom I respect a lot. So, I figured that I'd leave this one alone. However, as I was watching the third LotR movie, a thought occurred to me.

What if the peasant hero failed?

This spawned a lot of interesting ideas. What if the hero got to the end of the quest, and the Dark Lord killed him. That gave me a world with a large amount of conflict. In essence, this was an 'overthrow the evil overlord' plot hook with a twist that really interested me. This would be a world where the people were oppressed, where dark and evil creatures were in control of the government. But, beyond that, everyone would know that the prophesies that they'd relied on—the hero that they'd had faith in—had failed. That was the hook that made me want to deal with this plot, the idea of a people who's mythology had failed them.

The second plot framework I was interested in was the one generally used in 'heist' movies, like Ocean's Eleven or Sneakers. It's the same one used in Mission Impossible (the TV show, not the movies) or even the A-Team. It's the framework which involves a small group of very specialized heroes who tackle a seemingly impossible task. However, because each of them brings something very distinctive to the team, they're able to break down the difficult task and pull it off in a brilliant, clever way.

I realized that I'd never seen this done in a fantasy book. The hook here was the idea that this archetype would make a GREAT fantasy book. I could have a team of specialists, ala Mission Impossible, who each had a distinctive magical power. It seemed perfect for the genre.

Eventually, these two ideas bumped together in my head. I thought "Hey, what if my team of specialists were to face down this evil dark emperor who conquered the world." And, bam, MISTBORN was born.

The two ideas enhanced and influenced each other. I realized that my team would have to be a group of thieves, living in the cultural underground of the dark empire. They knew that the prophesies had failed a thousand years before, and were tired of the emperor being in charge. So, they would decide to overthrow him their own way: by robbing him silly and using his money to bribe away his own armies. The mixing of the two ideas also changed the way I looked at the dark lord plot. Because of the more personal nature of the conflict—a group of people working specifically to overthrow him—I decided it would make the conflict more relevant if the dark lord weren't some faceless evil, but someone far more understandable.

That is when the idea evolved my favorite part of the MISTBORN early plotting cycle. I realized it would be better if the dark lord—the Lord Ruler, as I started calling him—were the very hero who was supposed to have saved the world. What if, instead of saving it a thousand years before, he'd decided to become the evil he was trying to fight? He'd conquered the world instead of saving it.

With those ideas well-linked, I had a framework for what would happen in the book, as well as a history and motivation for my villain. That wasn't enough, however—I still needed

setting and characters. Those are next.

Part Four: Examples of Setting and Character

The setting for MISTBORN actually came from an older book that I'd written. This book had never quite taken off like I'd wanted it too. I'd been trying an experiment, seeing if I could write shorter fantasy novels without as epic of a storyline. Though I finished the book, it just didn't turn out like I'd wanted it to. The main character wasn't engaging enough, and the plot didn't really go anywhere. I didn't feel bad, since it was an experiment, and really didn't take that much of my time.

However, the setting of this book had been excellent. The idea had come from driving along on a foggy day, thinking about how visually interesting fog was. I decided to set a story in a place where the fog—or mists—were more of a world element than a simple weather phenomenon. The mists came upon the land every night, and had some mythological tie-ins and mystical meanings.

I stole this setting for the story I was working on, which I termed MISTBORN. I mixed with it a magic system that I'd played with a little before as well. What I liked about this system was that it involved a lot of different—yet related—powers. The reason this piece "Stuck" onto the story I was creating involved the team of thieves. The magic system, Allomancy, provided for a wide variety of magical 'specialties'. Therefore, as desired, I could provide each member of my thieving team with a specialized power. Some of the powers relied on the others, which made for a team that needed one another to work effectively.

With this falling into place, I was almost there. Now I needed characters. The process works a little differently with each book. In the case of MISTBORN, I tailored the main characters to fit the setting and plot framework I'd developed through my formational ideas. I had one vague idea for a character that I'd been thinking of—this was a character who had been sent to a slave camp and worked nearly to death. It wasn't enough of an idea to stand very well on its own.

However, when melded with the growing MISTBORN idea, it stuck on and grew into something quite interesting. After letting the character seed stew for a while, I soon had a concept that would work quite well: a charismatic, and selfish, thief lord who had tried to rob the dark emperor himself, but had been caught. After working in the Lord Ruler's slave camp for a year's time—during which time the thief's wife, who had also been sent there, died—he developed Allomantic powers (for a reason to be developed later in the design process) and broke out. Now, he's going to gather his team of thieves to succeed where he failed before, and take another stab at robbing the emperor—and, perhaps, find a way to kill the creature in the process.

This character, however, couldn't be my only main character. The edge of vengefulness I imagined for him needed something else to balance it. And so, I decided I'd need a second viewpoint protagonist. I took another seed idea, and devised an apprentice for the thief lord—a young girl who had just started displaying Allomantic powers. Going into much more here would probably spoil the book, so I'll just leave her character as more of a surprise.

Conclusion

Well, there you go. Hopefully, this lets you see a little bit more into my mind as I go through the writing process. Again, the process is different for everyone. This isn't a "How To" article. It's more of a "Look and Compare" article. Even for me, the process changes. For one

book, MISTBORN, you can see that I did three separate kinds of idea generation. I developed the plot from plots I'd experienced and enjoyed; I took the magic system from random sparkings and "What Ifs" in my mind; I developed the characters pretty much "on the spot", tailoring them to the other ideas I'd already decided to use for the story.

Whatever your process, make certain that it's not just relying on a single idea to hold your story. Find a way that you can combine ideas so that they synergize and play off of one another. If you have two great stories you want to write, think how much better the book will be if you can manage to combine them into a single effective story!

Thanks for reading! (And find more advice at www.brandonsanderson.com. Also, you'll find the first three chapters of MISTBORN posted there, and can see how these ideas I discussed are actually in place, being used.)

Brandon

Bond

By Joanne Anderton

Sayne brushed tiny icicles from the hilt of her sword. "A waste of good money to hire a dragon-rider and not use her."

"Or the dragon, do not forget." Merillian's voice travelled through the length of his crimson body and vibrated against Sayne's thighs. She gripped him tightly, more out of habit than need. A sudden movement could unseat the unwary in an instant, and it was a very long way down.

Below them, the Verns were forcing a smaller, green-clad army into retreat. Another battle won without her help. Sayne did not relish the fighting, but it was better than days of icy boredom.

"I guess we should head back." If she didn't return to Vern soon, she would have to listen to the magicians' complaints all afternoon.

Below them, the Verns were forcing a smaller, green-clad army into retreat. Another battle won without her help. Sayne did not relish the fighting, but it was better than days of icy boredom.

Merillian began his descent. His wings beat like drums close to her ears. As she leaned forward to rest against a large spine on his back, a flash of colour caught her attention. "Merillian," she cried. "Wait. Look to the southeast! What do you see?"

The dragon slowed and turned, straining his long neck to get a better view.

"A dragon!" he called to her. "With a rider clad in green. They must be Servillian."

"I didn't know they even had one." A dragon-rider. She hadn't met another one in years. "Why wouldn't we have seen them? They're heading toward Vern. We should stop them, wouldn't you say?"

Merillian paused. "The magicians will be angry."

A mercenary dragon-rider had few occasions to speak to her own kind. Sayne could not let one pass. "Because we stopped a dragon-rider from attacking their army? I don't think so. We can't just let them glide into Vern, can we?"

"As you wish." He banked so sharply she could tell he wasn't pleased.

Spots of darkness threatened her vision, and she focused on the breathing exercises designed to keep her conscious. It irked her. Despite spending most of her life on Merillian's back, her body had trouble compensating for the thin air. One of the disadvantages of being human.

The dragon-rider wore thick clothes similar to Sayne, but carried a long pike. It was a difficult weapon to wield. They were almost impossible to deflect if used as a lance, but in the high air, where the winds whip with frozen fury, they were dangerous. One strong gust and a slippery grip, and the dragon-rider could end up skewering his own mount.

The man must have some skill. Sayne placed her hand on the icy hilt of her sword.

The dragon was small and blue, dull in the air compared to Merillian's brilliance. It growled as they drew near, but did not attack. After a moment of tension, of narrowed eyes and bare teeth, the dragons slowed and circled each other. Sayne's stomach quivered in response, and the wind sliced into her right cheek. With a deep breath, she was able to control her stomach.

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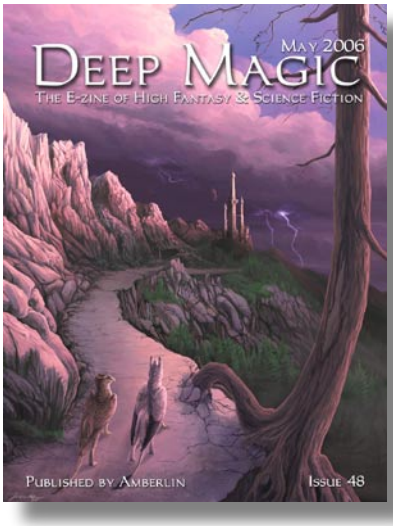
Featured Artist
Jennifer Miller



Age: 23
Residence: Western New York
Marital Status: Engaged
Children: None
Hobbies: Visual arts, outdoor activities (hiking, camping, and the like), Geocaching, fish-keeping, aircraft (and such related things).
Started Painting In: Like most artists, I've been drawing since I could hold a pencil, but I've only been painting seriously since 2000, roughly.
Artist Most Inspired By: I'd be hard pressed to name just one! I'm very much inspired by my artist friends, the old masters, the new masters—practically everyone.
Media You Work In: Digital (Painter), Watercolor, Gouache, Oil, Ink, Markers, Feathers…the list goes on!
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: I created art for Lucid Raven's CCG, Allegiance; War of Factions. Elf Fantasy magazine, a Dutch magazine, also recently used one of my pieces in an article about gryphons. I've been displaying my work in online galleries for many years now, as well.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: I sell originals, occasionally commissions, and prints of most of my work here: http://featherdust.critter.net/buy.html. The best way to contact me directly is through email: nam_art@hotmail.com.
Website URL: Regrettably, my personal website is in disarray due to a few problems that are out of my hands at the moment, but for the most complete and up-to-date gallery, folks are welcome to browse my Deviant Art Site: http://nambroth.deviantart.com/.

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: My childhood was not spectacular, but my imagination and the worlds within it were full to bursting. I started drawing as a need—or perhaps a compulsion—at an early age to try to manifest some of the imagery I envisioned. It wasn't until I was in my teens that I decided to dedicate my time to improving and doing what I loved in a concentrated matter.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: This is the most difficult question I am usually asked. I would hesitantly describe it as almost a mix of fantasy and wildlife art; putting my creatures in a believable

continued on next page

environment is something that appeals to me greatly. I tend to try and make my pieces somewhat detailed and well rendered, but keep them organic with enough of a "hand-painted" feel that they don't loose their feeling and become sterile.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Most everywhere! Nature is a huge inspiration—the natural world around us effortlessly creates imagery that any artist could be jealous of, if they took the time to look. Flight is another big inspiration to me, and I paint with a flying or sky theme often. Music and engrossing movies can be quite inspirational—turning on some good music and letting my mind (and paintbrush) wander is almost certain to yield interesting results. Lastly, but probably most importantly, are the people in my life that I draw inspiration from daily.

Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)
A: This piece was actually a commission of sorts. A very kind woman overseas commissioned me to paint a scene with a few base elements, and I was given nearly free reign. The two gryphons were made to symbolize herself and her husband, traveling a mountainside trail to a fantastic destination. I think the different elements to the piece can have different meaning to different viewers, and perhaps that is my favorite part of sharing my work—to those it appeals to, it appeals to them for different reasons. The towering cliff wall and, even more so, the looming thunderheads, are supposed to be made less intimidating by the warm glow of the late sunset.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: I had the high hopes of pursuing art as a career, and in 2003, I was fortunate to have a very talented artist, Amber Hill, as a roommate, and we really fed off of one another, in a good way. We've since parted, but the things I've learned from those times are invaluable. A great number of other artists have unknowingly influenced me as well; just looking at the work of those I admire gives me inspiration! However, perhaps it is a movie that first influenced me as an artist. As a very young child, I was shown "Flight of Dragons" (ironically produced the year I was born), and much to my parent's dismay, I watched it daily for many years of my life. It was my first introduction to fantasy, and I'll not forget it.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Good ones, I hope! As other artists before me have mentioned, the growing popularity of Fantasy/Sci-Fi in our modern culture is an encouraging one, what with movies like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the Harry Potter books and movies, and more recently *The Chronicles of Narnia* being so well received. Indeed, most fantasy fans have appreciated the Tolkien stories as well as those of Narnia for some years now, but such a large-scale appreciation by the masses of these classics told in a movie format is exciting. I'm still young, but I understand that these genres were not taken seriously (if accepted at all) even some 50 years ago, and the trend seems to be tipping in the other direction. This is music to my ears indeed!

Kindred Spirits

By Aliette de Bodard

Ten years after Daresh turned his back on the lake and on his own kin, he was summoned by the naga Elders. That they should thus profess their need of him was unexpected. Unheard of. Curiosity drew him out of his forest home, and back to the underwater city of his birth.

In the council room of the palace, the twelve Elders were waiting for him. Like Daresh, they all wore their naga shape, half-snake, half-man. Twelve identical human faces with jewels on their foreheads stared at him under cobra hoods. The bodies of the Elders were those of men, save for the legs, which were fused together and lay coiled on the ground.

"I am glad you came, brother," one of the Elders said, and it seemed to Daresh that the other eleven nagas shared its voice, like a persistent echo. "You have been summoned because you alone among us are mortal."

"I know this," Daresh said, with a trace of bitterness. It had set him apart since childhood. He rubbed the place on his forehead where his own jewel should have been, but stopped, aware of the impression of vulnerability he projected. "What difference does it make?"

Selihe was the oldest of the Elders, if such concepts had a meaning in a race where there were few births, and few deaths.

"You will take your full human shape and go to the city of Sasti," the Elder said. "You will attend the Choosing Day of the king's daughter."

Daresh smiled inwardly. Did they expect him to find a human wife, since no naga would want a husband who was not immortal? And he was to court a princess, no less. What would she say if she found out that he was no more human than the Elders? "I'm not ready to marry."

"We do not order you to do so. You will be lodged within the palace; you will have the freedom of the grounds. You will search for the Flame which the King of Sasti stole from us, and bring it back to us."

Daresh's sarcastic mood disappeared. This was more serious. This touched the heart of the naga way of life. That the Flame should be lost... But almost immediately another part of him thought, savagely, *it does not concern me. I turned my back on them exactly as my own mother turned her back on me.* "I can't."

"You will do as you are told. You are still of the Kin, Daresh, and you still owe us loyalty."

Daresh stood, stubbornly, refusing to look any of them in the eye. He was no longer theirs to order about. He had broken his chains, escaped into the depths of the forest, and had taken on the habit of a hermit. The lake was the place of his childhood, nothing more.

After a while one of the Elders—Selihe, Daresh thought, the last person he wanted to try to persuade him—slid over the floor to him. "May I have leave to speak with Daresh alone?"

Selihe was the oldest of the Elders, if such concepts had a meaning in a race where there were few births, and few deaths. It did not show much; only in the depths of his eyes did an odd light shine, like a memory of some primal fire. He held himself straight, and his gestures were oddly fluid, each movement segueing into the next flawlessly.

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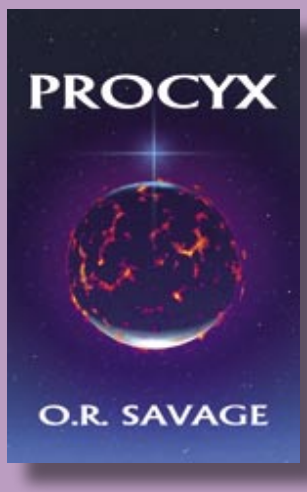

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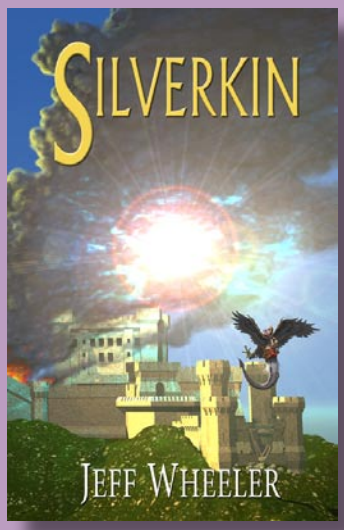

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Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Well of Tears (The Crowthistle Chronicles Book 2)

By Cecilia Dart-Thornton

The tragedy ending in *The Iron Tree* left young Jewel, a daughter born with her father's invulnerability, and her uncle fleeing the king's men of Slievmordhu. She is the last heir of a wicked sorcerer who has locked his secrets within the Dome of Strang. But their flight for safety in the north leads only to further tragedy and Jewel is left alone in the wild mountains. She is discovered by a group of young people, weathermasters from High Darioneth, and there she finds shelter and security.

The Well of Tears is the story of Jewel and Arran Maelstronnar, the son of the greatest of the weathermasters. In the sheltered realm of High Darioneth, the weathermasters use their powers to control storms, summon lightning, and sail the skies in voluminous balloons. They are respected as the greatest mages of the world, and their skills and diplomacy are for hire in all circles of nobility. Jewel grows to womanhood sheltered in that safe haven, but secretly her heart yearns to understand the secrets of her heritage and unlock the mysteries of the Dome. And when she does, she and Arran learn the meaning of the Well of Tears.

It is within the Dome itself that they learn that the cruel sorcerer of Strang had spent the end of his days searching for the secret to immortality and had found it. The sorcerer left record that a star had fallen to the earth and broken in several pieces, leaving small silver craters in various hidden places of the earth. These small craters—the wells—each contained a small treasure of magical water which would grant the drinker immortality. But the sorcerer of Strang had an unfaithful servant who was greedy for his knowledge and wealth. And through circumstances beyond Jewel's control or knowledge, there were others interested in securing immortality as well.

And so Jewel and Arran begin a race against time to seize the waters of the wells before their enemies can. It is a quest that bonds them both together in love and urgency. For if they cannot succeed in claiming enough of the wells before the dark forces determined to thwart them, then their love faces risks unendurable to imagine.

Ms. Dart-Thornton's worlds are full of wights and magic and characters with all the emotions of Shakespearean plays. Jewel and Arran both have depth and personality. The cast is wide and complex, but the emotions used—greed, love, despair, triumph—are all real. It is a story that makes you wonder whether a quest for immortality should be considered, even to save the world from the machinations of evil, for events never turn out as expected for anyone. Book 3 will continue the haunting story, but from the point of view of Jewel's daughter—a daughter who cannot be injured and cannot die, with all of its unintended consequences.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

Magic Street

by Orson Scott Card

Orson Scott Card is one of the most important authors in SF/F today. He is one of only a handful of authors who has written significant and important works in both the science fiction and fantasy sub-genres. His books include space opera, time travel, alternate history, and re-told fairy tales. One area he hasn't written in, though, has been the contemporary or 'urban' fantasy. But that has now changed with the publication of *Magic Street*.

Magic Street tells the tale of the Baldwin Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles and the strange goings-on that occur there over the course of twenty years. The book opens with Byron Williams, English professor at Pepperdine, on his way home when a homeless man flags him down for a ride. Byron does so, against his usual inclination. Strange things happen to Byron, making him wonder about the homeless man. When he gets home (with the homeless man still in tow), he discovers that his wife is about to give birth, even though his wife was not the slightest bit pregnant that morning. Once the baby has arrived, the homeless man takes the infant and disappears.

Later that day another denizen of Baldwin Hills, young Cecil Tucker discovers an abandoned baby in an overgrown park. He takes the child home and his neighbor, nurse Ura Lee Smitcher adopts it as her own.

The years pass and the baby, now known as Mack Street, has grown up into a teenager. In the years since his discovery, however, a number of folks from Baldwin Hills have had their dreams come true, but in strange, unexpected, and sometimes lethal ways.

Mack understands that he is different, that he has powers that others do not. One day, wandering through the neighborhood, he discovers a house where no house should be, a house that only he can see, and then only out of the corner of his eye. He figures out how to enter the house, only to find that it is a portal to faerie and is guarded by the same homeless man who was there on the day of his birth. Mack wanders into faerie to learn that things that happen there have strange effects on the real world. He also learns that his mysterious birth and his more mysterious powers are all related to a power struggle between the faeries, and that he may be a pawn created solely to tip the balance of power.

Mack is thus confronted with what may be his destiny, determined before his birth, and he must decide whether he will follow his destiny or become his own individual and do what he feels and knows to be right.

Magic Street is definitely a coming-of-age story, but anyone who has read Orson Scott Card knows that he does not provide any easy answers, that he makes the reader work through the story to grow along with his characters. *Magic Street* is no exception. Before the story is over, Mack will have to face who he is and what he is and make a decision about how he is going to live his life. It would be easy to write a story where it is all cut and dried, but life is not that way and so Card's characters, being true to life and well developed, do not allow for easy answers. The neighborhood of Baldwin Hills is predominantly African American, so race issues come into play, but although race plays a major part in the story, there is no movement toward or away from focusing on race. Rather, race is but one element that makes up the complex characters that are affected by Mack's presence in Baldwin Hills.

But *Magic Street* is also at the same time an incredibly enjoyable read, a passionately told story about right and wrong, a ripping good yarn.

Possible objectionable material: there are some low-key sexual references and encounters, as well as some strong language at points.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

continued from page 14

This is an important one. This one needs to get through."

It'll get through, Sandor vowed to himself. If all went well, Sandor would never have to see the town of Last Ditch again. Careful to keep his tone casual, he asked, "What am I carrying?"

"Orden has a couple of swords to sell. I gave him the mining rights to a beautiful obdurium vein. He could make a name for himself with these blades. It's what you bring back that's more important, though. We need medicine. Sealskin blankets. Boots. Seeds. Most of our grain crop was wiped out in that windstorm last month."

Sandor studied Borne in silence. By all accounts the mayor was an arrogant, greedy man, but Sandor did have to admit that the man took his job seriously. Life in Last Ditch was always precarious, and Borne kept the townspeople alive and productive.

"When do we leave?" Sandor asked.

"Three days."

Sandor laughed. "Oh, that's going to cost you. The late season, the short notice...I need eight percent."

Borne groaned in dismay. Shaking his head, he said, "That's outrageous, even for you!"

Sandor shrugged, wiping off the bar top. "Go ask Alaine then. You might get him sober in three days."

"Gods curse you, man. Eight percent!" Borne drained the rest of his ale. "Beh, that goes down hard. Fine, then, eight percent it is."

Sandor choked back an exultant cry. With that take, he was definitely not coming back to Last Ditch. "Agreed. How many sleds?"

"Five. Who goes with you? Callia, I assume?"

"Of course." Sandor looked up to see the mayor's sly grin. "What?" He snorted laughter. "Me and Callia? You have to be joking. I've known woolebeasts with friendlier dispositions than Callia. If she even has a heart—which I doubt—it's carved out of stone."

Borne chuckled. "She's a hard woman. A good sledder, though."

"The best."

"Who else?"

Sandor refilled the mayor's ale, then poured one for himself. It would come out of his wages from Allie, but he wasn't too concerned about that right now. "Edek."

"The rukie? All right. He's dependable. Strange, though."

"No argument here, but he's useful to have around. Just in case." Sandor ran a hand through his short, graying hair, thinking hard. "What about Niccolo? I can't stand the man, but he's solid."

"He is hard to stomach, isn't he? I'll have to let him out of jail. He busted up a miner pretty bad last night. Got into a fight over some ale wench. Okay, one sled left."

Sandor knew whom he wanted, but he wasn't sure what Borne's reaction would be. He drank his ale as he pretended to think it over. The ale was thick and bitter, and did in fact smell terrible. Allie's homebrew recipe was a closely guarded secret. Like anything, though, one got used to it after a while.

"What about Lucas?" Sandor asked, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

Borne looked puzzled. "Who?"

"Lucas. Allie's son."

"What? He's just a boy!"

"He's eighteen. He's strong, smart, works hard. He could do it. Put him in the middle of the sled train, he'd do fine."

"No, absolutely not. He's too young. The snow pack is rough this year. You need experienced sledders."

"Mayor, how old were you when you made your first trip to Stonespur? Sixteen?"

Borne frowned. "Fifteen actually."

"There you go. He's never been out of Last Ditch in his life. He needs to get out and see there's more to the world than this frozen hole in the ground."

"Are you training your replacement?"

Sandor barely concealed his surprise. The mayor was very close to the mark. Sandor kept silent and waited for Borne to make his decision.

"Curse you, man. I already gave you eight percent! All right, Lucas it is. But be careful. Stick to the trails and the waypoints."

"I always do."

"And that's why you're the Captain."

Sandor grimaced. "Stop with that 'Captain' nonsense. That was a long time ago."

"We are who we are, my friend. No sense trying to hide from it." Borne stood up and drained his mug. "Ugh, does this stuff ever get any better? Get your team together. I'll get the cargo ready." The two men shook hands. "Good luck. Captain."

* * *

After the mayor left, Sandor swept the common room floor. He paid little attention to the task, though. His mind was focused on the upcoming trip. The journey across the frozen wasteland from Last Ditch to Stonespur was brutal and dangerous. The weather, especially this late in the season, was bound to be unpredictable. There were snowbears, wolves, and giant, tusked woolebeasts to contend with. And of course the rukies; the region's natives had slaughtered entire caravan teams in the past. Their poison-tipped bone darts could drop a man in seconds.

But all these dangers were what made the job so lucrative. Sandor stood to make around thirty crowns.

Sandor was so caught up in his own thoughts that he failed to notice Allie slip up behind him. She reached around his broad chest, gripping him in a tight embrace.

"Was that the mayor I heard?"

"Yes."

"When do you leave?"

"Three days."

"So soon?"

A pang of regret, surprising in its intensity, twisted Sandor's stomach. He realized he would miss Allie. Their relationship had never been built on anything as ephemeral as love. They kept each other company, and that was it. They both knew and accepted the limits of the relationship.

And yet, he would miss her.

He turned around to look at her. Allie was Sandor's age, somewhere around forty. Short and slender, with rather plain features, she barely came up to Sandor's chest. What she lacked in stature or beauty, she made up in bemusing wisdom. A ghost of a smile seemed to always lurk at the corner of her mouth, as if the entire universe existed for her own private amusement.

"Knowing you, you already have your team picked out," Allie said. "Let me guess...Callia,

of course. She claims she won't travel with anyone else. And the rukie, Edek." She tapped a finger against her lips. "Not Jesper. He's still nursing that broken arm. Niccolo?"

"Very good. And the last one?"

"I'm not sure. Not Alaine, obviously."

"Obviously. No, Borne agreed to let me take Lucas."

Allie stepped back, her expression a mixture of surprise, fear, and pride. "Lucas?" she whispered, then sighed. "I guess it had to happen eventually. I was hoping he would find another path, but he's always wanted to be a sledder." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'm glad he's going with you, Sandor. He worships you, you know? You keep him safe. He's the only good thing I ever did in my life."

Sandor leaned the broom against a table and took Allie in both arms. "I'll do my best. It's a good team, we should be fine."

"He'll be thrilled. Do you want me to tell him? No, it's better if you do it. You're the caravan leader. It should come from you, not from his old, fretting mother."

Sandor laughed. He began unlacing Allie's bodice. "Not so old yet, I shouldn't think."

"You wicked man," she said with a mischievous grin. "Let's go upstairs before the crowds get here."

Sandor grinned back. "After you, milady."

* * *

When Sandor and Allie returned to the tavern's common room, a few customers were scattered across the room and Lucas was tending bar. Sandor wasn't surprised to see who was drinking Allie's homebrew and chatting across the bar with Lucas.

"Niccolo," Sandor said, crossing the room. "News travels fast in this town. I see Borne let you out of jail already."

Niccolo was a large man, several inches taller than Sandor, and heavily muscled. With his dark hair and eyes, he never lacked for female attention. His bearded face was handsome but arrogant, with an ever-present, condescending smirk. With a wry grin, Niccolo said, "Just a misunderstanding over a woman." He winked at Allie. "I'm not sure they're worth the trouble."

Muttering something under her breath, Allie disappeared into the kitchen.

"So, who's on the team, Captain? Borne was sparse with the details, other than to tell me to sober up fast because we leave in three days."

"Then why are you drinking?"

"What, this? This is nothing. Just a little something to ease my pounding head."

Sandor stepped behind the bar next to Lucas. "No more drinks for him, you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

With a friendly smile, Niccolo pointed a finger in Lucas's face. "Boy, if you ever refuse me a drink, I'll pull your legs off and stuff 'em in your ears. You understand?"

Lucas grinned. "I understand that too."

"Smart lad."

Lucas turned towards the kitchen, but Sandor stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Stay for a moment."

Lucas's eyes widened in surprise, no doubt pleased to be asked to join in the conversation. Lucas was a tall, gangly young man with his mother's gray eyes. He moved with the self-conscious awkwardness of someone who isn't quite comfortable in his own body. Sandor knew

that would soon pass, and the boy would develop into a fine man. He possessed his mother's intelligence and good sense.

"It's a five-person team," Sandor explained. "I'm the lead. The other sledders are you, Niccolo, along with Edek, Callia...and Lucas here gets the middle sled. If he wants it."

Sandor knew what Lucas's reaction would be, but he was worried about Niccolo. The man was prickly. He might balk at the prospect of having to play wet-nurse to a new sledder.

Lucas's eyes were wide. "Do you mean it?"

"I mean it. Unless you have more pressing duties elsewhere?"

"No! I'll be there! This is...thank you! You won't regret it. I'll work hard, and follow orders and --"

Sandor held up a hand. "I know. I'm not worried about that. You know the risks, though. One mistake out on the snowpack and you're dead."

Lucas's grin vanished. "I know. I'm ready. I want to go."

"All right. Go tell your mother. She already knows, but she'll want to hear about it from you."

With a few long strides, Lucas disappeared into the kitchen. Sandor turned to Niccolo, who was drinking his ale with a thoughtful look on his face.

"What do you think?" Sandor asked.

Niccolo stroked his beard. "It's a good choice," he said. "He'll do well."

Sandor was surprised at the man's seriousness. "I'm glad you agree."

"We need new blood. You and Callia and I are getting too old for this. Alaine is young, but he's an idiot. He'll make a mistake one day and people will die. The people in this town rely on us. We need smart, dependable sledders." He nodded in the direction of the kitchen. "He seems a likely boy. Is he yours?"

"No. But sometimes I wish he were. Allie doesn't talk much about his father. He was an adventurer who passed through Last Ditch on his way to someplace more exciting."

Niccolo's usual wry smirk creased his handsome features. "More exciting than here? That can't be hard to find. Thanks for the ale. It's tradition for the team leader to buy a free round, right?"

Sandor frowned but waved a hand dismissively.

"Good man!" He stood up to leave. "Well, I'm off to Viola's for a few hours. One of her girls is sweet on me, and she only charges me half price. If Callia is the only woman going with us, I don't expect to get much attention during the trip."

"Three days, Niccolo. And you best be sober when we leave. Stay out of the vaj-house."

Niccolo sketched a mock bow, then left.

Allie came into the common room from the kitchen. "Lucas is practically walking on the ceiling, he's so excited. How did Niccolo take it?"

"Better than I thought. He understands my reasoning."

"I suppose you need to be off now to see the rest of your team."

"I'll be back to help with the evening crowd." He leaned over to give Allie a kiss. "You all right?"

"Just... worried. My two men going off together."

Sandor felt another uneasy twinge of guilt. He almost told her everything right then. No, he decided, he'd send a letter back with Callia. It might be the coward's way out, but it would be for the best. He didn't want to upset Lucas either. The boy needed to be focused on the trip.

"I'll see you this evening then."

Sandor crossed the common room floor and pushed aside the tanned hide that served as the tavern's front door. He glanced back in time to catch Allie wiping a tear from her cheek. He pretended not to notice. Instead, he waved and stepped outside

Whenever he gazed on the town of Last Ditch, Sandor was always struck by humanity's ability to survive and adapt, especially when there was coin to be made. The town was comprised of a series of caves carved into the sides of a deep crevasse, warmed from below by volcanic vents. A confusing maze of sloping ramps, stairs, and tunnels connected the levels of the town. The ever-present steam rising up from the vents obscured the structures and people on the far side of the crevasse. The warm, humid air smelled vaguely of sulfur. But as it was with Allie's homebrew, one got used to it in time.

Sandor made his way down a sloping pathway towards one of the rope bridges spanning the crevasse. He passed other taverns and stores. All of their doorways were covered with animal hides, since wood was a precious commodity in Last Ditch, used only for the forge fires. The people he passed, mostly off-duty miners or shopkeepers, nodded and smiled politely. Less than a thousand people called Last Ditch their home, and everyone knew everyone else. Sandor's position as a sled team leader made him the town's version of nobility.

The bridges connecting the two sides of the crevasse were treacherous contraptions of thick rope made slick and damp by the rising steam. Sandor mostly kept to the east side of town, where the majority of the townspeople lived. The only time he ever ventured to the west side was to see Edek.

The bridge was wide enough for only a single person, so Sandor had to wait for an older man, a hunter named Greggor, to cross to his side. The man saluted when he reached Sandor. "Morning, Captain. I hear you're leaving soon."

"Morning, old timer. News travels fast. How's the woolebeast hunting?"

Greggor shrugged. "Good, for now. Looks like we're in for another long, hard storm season."

"They always are."

"Aye, so they are. We'll make do."

"Take care, Greggor."

"You do the same. Be careful. I hear the rukies are restless this season. More fighting than usual between the clans."

"And that usually means more *saduka*. Thanks for the warning."

"Aye. G'bye, Captain."

Sandor made his way across the bridge, careful to watch where he put his feet. The bridge danced and swayed in the warm updrafts. Sandor was grateful to feel solid stone beneath his feet when he reached the far side.

The caves on the west side of the crevasse were smaller. The hide doors were old and tattered, the living spaces dark and cramped. The people who lived here were mostly miners, the lowest rung of the Last Ditch social hierarchy. The irony was particularly cruel since without the miners, there would be no obdurium ore, and therefore no Last Ditch.

Sandor reached a narrow doorway covered with a sealskin hide. The opening was indistinguishable from the dozens of nearby dwellings except for a single pictogram painted above the arch—a crude semblance of a snowbear claw.

"Edek! You home?"

A soft voice called, "Yes, come in, Captain."

Sandor pushed aside the door and entered.

Edek's home was a round, one-room cave, dimly lit with tallow candles. A narrow cot stood against the wall next to an unlit iron brazier. The room was cold. The only decoration was a thick wool rug adorned with the intricate, swirling loops favored by the rukies.

In the middle of the rug sat Edek, with his back to Sandor, his legs crossed, and his arms folded neatly in his lap. Sandor rolled his eyes when he realized that Edek was naked.

"Gods, man, put some clothes on."

"We all came into this world naked, Captain."

"Yes, we did. Then the first thing your mother did was put some clothes on you."

Edek laughed, a high-pitched childlike cackle. "No, the first thing my mother did was roll me in the snow. That is the custom in my clan."

"That explains a lot."

Edek unfolded his legs and stood. A small, wiry man, he came up only to Sandor's shoulder. His bald head was covered with black tattoos in the same swirls and arcs as his rug. These marks had some significance to Edek's people, but Sandor had never understood what exactly. The tattoos covered his scalp, reaching down to his left cheek and the back of his neck.

Grinning, Edek said, "If my nakedness bothers you, I will clothe myself."

"Thank you."

Chuckling softly, Edek pulled on breeches and a shirt. Sandor shook his head. He had known the rukie for several years, and had been on many caravan trips with him, but still found him to be inexplicably odd. The rukies were a strange people, and Edek was himself an outcast.

"What were you doing?"

"Praying to the Wind Goddess. It is how I prepare for a caravan."

"You heard already?"

"Yes. We will have a new sledder with us too?"

"Allie's boy, Lucas."

Edek nodded. "Yes, a good choice. We will teach him well."

"I hope so. What can you tell me about the clans? Do we have to worry about *saduka*?"

"Always." Edek walked over to his cot. Leaning against the wall was a sword in a sheath. Edek removed the sword, holding it up for Sandor to see. It was an unusual weapon to Sandor's eyes. The curving hilt was as long as his forearm, carved of bone and wrapped with leather. The blade itself was fine steel, but short, only half the length of Sandor's saber.

Edek smiled, wrinkling his brown, weather-beaten face. "But we will be ready for them."

* * *

The next three days passed quickly. Sandor sat in on meetings between Borne and the town's geomancers and artisans, negotiating fees for hauling goods. In addition to the usual obdurium weapons, there were other goods to be carried as well—furs, scrimshaw carvings, and rukie beadwork. These items brought a fine price in Stonespur. Not as much as the obdurium though. Being the only known source in the world of the valuable metal gave them a distinct advantage in the marketplace.

The size and weight of each item had to be carefully considered against its potential value. The goods were spread out amongst the five sleds, taking into account the necessary food, water, and other supplies that had to be carried. The physical strength of the individual sledders was factored in; a sledder pushing too much weight would grow tired and slow down the team.

Sandor had his own preparations to make as well. He scrutinized his gear, checking his

boots for leaks, and making sure his parka with its waterproof, seal-intestine inner lining was intact. Along with Edek, he examined the available sleds, selecting five sturdy ones. He honed the steel sled runners himself until they were razor sharp, then rubbed them down with wax.

Sandor also helped Lucas prepare for his first caravan. They purchased supplies and studied maps of the region, charting their route first to Crystalmere, then across the Blun River, then through the Iron Tooth Mountains. For his part, Lucas appeared calm and relaxed, but Sandor could feel the excitement and tension emanating from the boy. That was to be expected, but Sandor knew it would eventually drain Lucas's energy. Sledding was tedious, repetitive labor, requiring strength and stamina, not quick adrenaline bursts. Sandor made a mental note to set a slow, steady pace to begin with, just to help Lucas get acclimated.

The day before departure, Sandor stopped into Allie's tavern. He carried a long, narrow bundle wrapped in soft seal fur. Lucas was tending bar, and he greeted Sandor with a grin.

"Evening, Captain. Ale?"

Realizing this would be his last-ever mug of Allie's homebrew, Sandor nodded. He placed the bundle on the bar as he sat down.

Lucas handed him a full mug. "What's this?" he asked, pointing.

"This is our last piece of cargo. Orden just finished it a few hours ago." Sandor carefully unwrapped the seal fur, revealing a heavy broadsword. He grasped the hilt in both hands and drew the sword from its scabbard.

The blade was made of solid obdurium—pearly gray and marbled with blue streaks. Sandor hefted the sword; the balance was perfect. The smoky orange light from the fireplace glinted off the blade's edge. Once honed, a bluesteel sword never again needed sharpening. The sword's hilt was made of oak, wrapped with soft white leather, and carved with the roaring head of a snowbear.

"It's beautiful," Lucas said, his eyes wide.

"This could easily bring two thousand gold monarchs."

Lucas gasped. "That much? For a sword?"

"It takes a skilled geomancer to work with raw obdurium. The ore has to be processed immediately. Within hours after exposure to air, it turns brittle and shatters. There are maybe a few hundred obdurium swords in the world. Every king, prince, and merchant with more coin than sense wants one." Sandor ran a finger along the flat edge of the sword. "See how consistent the coloration is? Sometimes you get iron or nickel mixed in with the raw ore, and then you get variations in the color."

"Do the geomancers really use...magic?" Lucas asked.

Sandor suppressed a shudder. He didn't understand or trust magic. He accepted it as necessary, but he still found it unsettling. "They do. Without magic, the obdurium would shatter like glass the first time you hit something with it."

Sandor replaced the sword in its scabbard and rolled it back up in the fur. With a grin, he said, "I've got something else to show you. Orden gave me this." From his belt, Sandor took a dagger in a black sheath. Lucas gasped when Sandor pulled out the curved obdurium blade.

"He made this for you?"

"It was a gift. I told him the dagger was too much, but he insisted. Orden always tells me that if I hadn't brought him to Last Ditch, introduced him to the mayor, and made sure he got his own forge, he'd probably still be making belt buckles in Stonespur. I never thought I'd own a bluesteel weapon."

"You deserve it, Captain."

Sandor slipped the dagger back into the sheath. “Orden gave me strict instructions to kill a rukie or two with it, but hopefully I won’t need to do that.”

* * *

Finally, the departure day arrived. Sandor woke early. His chambers were dark and cold. Only a single sliver of light slipped through the doorway. Sandor rose and lit a small candle. He paused to study his meager possessions—his bed, a wooden trunk, his weapons, and some cooking utensils. In ten years, he had done little to make his chambers more hospitable. The only decoration was a twisted strand of rukie beadwork hanging on the wall, a gift from Allie. Sandor ran a finger down the ivory beads, marveling at the craftsmanship.

He methodically got dressed, starting with fleece undergarments, then trousers and shirt made of woolebeast hide, then sealskin socks woven with smokegrass, and finally his waterproof sealskin boots. When he was finished, he pushed aside his cot. Beneath was the stone floor, broken only by a narrow fissure. Sandor slipped a fingernail into the fissure and pried back a cleverly concealed panel, revealing a small hole in the floor. Inside the hole was a canvas sack.

The sack jingled in Sandor’s hands. He peered inside at the pile of gold monarchs. The coins represented ten years of labor, as well as his way out of Last Ditch.

Sandor hung the sack from his belt, then put on his heavy parka. Cut in the knee-length rukie style, the coat was made of caribou skin and lined with seal intestine. A fur-trimmed hood and a facemask sewn into the collar protected his head and face from the brutal surface winds. He tied a leather belt around his waist, from which he hung his new obdurium dagger. After making sure his gloves and snow goggles were in the coat pockets, he picked up his battered saber and scabbard.

Sandor stood in the doorway, taking one last look around. With a sigh, he pushed aside the hide door and left.

Sandor wrinkled his nose at the stench in the air—a toxic mixture of sulfur, sweat, and human waste. He was anxious to leave Last Ditch, to smell the fresh, pure air of the frozen tundra.

Townspeople waved to him as he made his way up the winding pathways and stairs towards the surface. No one engaged him in conversation though. It was considered ill luck to talk to a sledder on the day of his departure. If he died on the trip, it was said his spirit would come back to haunt the person he had last spoken with.

Sandor nodded back at the people he passed. The sack of coins banged softly against his thigh, concealed beneath his parka.

The air grew colder as he climbed. The wind strengthened, shredding the clouds of rising steam into tattered streamers. Sandor took a moment to savor the lingering heat, knowing it would be the last time he was truly warm until the caravan reached the Blun River crossing.

The crevasse widened near the surface. The topmost levels of Last Ditch were dedicated to growing vegetables and grains. Sandor passed shallow terraces carved into the rock. The terraces were located close enough to the surface to receive direct sunlight, but far enough down to soak up the warmth from the underground vents. Men and women moved through the neat rows of plants, tending and harvesting the food that kept the town alive.

Sandor buttoned his parka and slipped on his gloves. Already the warmth was seeping from his bones. The strip of grey sky widened above his head as he approached the surface. He climbed the final set of stairs, reaching a courtyard enclosed by a high stone wall. A squat tower

rose above the wall next to a narrow iron gate, flanked by two guards. One of the guards silently opened the gate.

Sandor stepped through the gateway, out of Last Ditch, and into the frozen wastelands. In the pre-dawn light, the world was a cheerless gray. The snow-covered plain stretched for leagues in every direction—barren, featureless, and inhospitable. Only the dim shadows of the Iron Tooth Mountains to the south broke the monotony of the landscape. The wind howled like a living thing, wrapping Sandor in its chill arms. And the cold...the cold was insidious, worming its way down the neck of his parka or up his sleeves. Sandor smiled. The cold was a familiar enemy, one he knew how to deal with. It was an enemy to be respected, but not feared.

The hard snowpack crunched beneath his boots as he crossed an open stretch to a long, low building made of stone. The two large doors at the building's end stood open. A group of guards milled about, keeping an eye on the horizon for rukies or snowbears, and stamping their feet to keep warm.

Sandor entered the sled house via a smaller door. Inside were dozens of sleds and sled parts. A kettle of aromatic tea hung over the fire crackling in the pit in the center of the room. Near the open door stood five sleds of rukie design. Each sled was two feet wide, six feet long, and made of wood and bone with steel runners. In the back, the handles curved up to about waist high. The sleds were packed with food, water, and goods, all covered with waterproof sealskin tarps, and lashed down with rope.

A slender figure moved between the sleds, tugging on the ropes, checking the tie-downs. Sandor shook his head. Even reaching the sled house before dawn wasn't early enough to beat Callia.

The figure turned when she heard Sandor approach. She was tall, with black hair framing a tanned, weathered face, heavily lined by age and wind. She often reminded Sandor of an oak tree—hard, cold, and implacable. Her gray eyes certainly showed no warmth when she greeted Sandor.

"Captain."

"Morning, Callia. Are we ready?"

Callia cocked an eyebrow. "You packed the sleds?"

"I did. Is there a problem?"

"The boy's sled is too light."

"He's no good to us if he's exhausted after the first day."

"You're coddling him. He could push another ten pounds."

"Perhaps on the way back. Don't say anything to him though. I don't want him to know he's pushing light."

Callia shrugged, then went back to checking the ropes and knots. Sandor jammed his hands in his pockets, feeling the bag of coins beneath his parka. He stood in the open doorway, looking out at the forbidding landscape. The sheer power of the land was breathtaking, and even beautiful in its own way.

Callia appeared next to him holding two cups of hot tea. "Enjoy it while you can."

Sandor took the cup gratefully. It would be another three days until the next campfire, when the caravan reached the wooded shores of Crystalmere.

The sun peered over the horizon, turning the snowpack into a huge, dazzling mirror. Sandor squinted against the glare. Behind him, he heard laughing voices. He turned to see Niccolo enter the sled house, followed by Edek and Lucas. All three men were dressed in surface gear. In his typical bizarre fashion, Edek's parka was unbuttoned. Edek had once tried to explain

to Sandor this rukie tradition. Edek claimed his people had to prove to the Wind Goddess that they were not afraid of her. The longer a rukie was able to withstand the chill air without buttoning his parka, the more respect and honor he earned in her eyes.

"Morning, Captain," Niccolo said. "Callia, you're looking as beautiful as always."

Callia muttered something in the rukie tongue, drawing a laugh from Edek. The intent of the words was clear, even if the exact meaning was not.

Niccolo bowed low, a grin on his bearded face. "I can only assume you are expressing your undying love for me. I regret I must decline. To limit myself to only one woman would be devastating to the rest of the female population."

Sandor said, "Lucas, a moment?" The boy followed Sandor away from the others. When they were alone, Sandor looked over the boy's gear, making sure the clothes weren't too tight. "How is your mother?" he asked, tugging at Lucas's coat.

"She cried. But I think she's proud of me too."

"Of course she is. And mothers always cry." Sandor paused, feeling renewed guilt over not stopping to say goodbye to Allie. "I'll be in the lead, so I won't be able to keep an eye on you. I'm leaving that to Niccolo and Edek. Listen to what they say. Don't push yourself too hard. Don't feel like you have to impress us. Keep a steady pace. The key is to keep moving, to keep your body warm, but not to work up a sweat. If you feel yourself getting too warm, open up a few buttons on your parka, or push your hood back a bit. Otherwise the sweat will freeze to your skin. Do you have your goggles?"

Lucas nodded, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a flat piece of wood with two narrow slits cut lengthwise down the middle. A length of rope was tied to each end, making a loop.

"Good. Without your goggles, the glare off the snowpack will blind you."

Sandor slapped the boy on the back, then turned back to the group. "I'll lead, followed by Callia, then Lucas in the middle. Niccolo, you're next. Edek has rear-guard. We'll start out fairly slow until Lucas finds his rhythm. Standard ten-step spacing. Saddle up, the day's wasting."

"Not quite yet, Captain," Edek said. "Boy, come here." Edek led Lucas out of the sled house to a nearby drift. He knelt down in the snow, pulling Lucas to his knees next to him. "This is your first caravan. We must introduce you to Ulonora, the Wind Goddess."

Lucas looked over at Sandor, his eyes questioning. Sandor rolled his eyes and shrugged.

"What do I do?" Lucas asked.

Edek plunged his bare hands into the snow bank. He pulled out a huge handful of snow, which he proceeded to rub over his face and neck. Niccolo roared with laughter, and even Callia cracked a small smile.

Lucas frowned, no doubt wondering if he was the butt of some elaborate joke. Edek's face was somber, though. Melting snow ran down his weathered cheeks. "Do it, boy," he said. "You can't go tramping around the surface smelling like a city dweller. You must wash off the stink of Last Ditch. Only then will Ulonora allow you safe passage."

With a grimace, Lucas scooped up a handful of snow. He paused, still unsure, but Edek motioned him to continue. Lucas shoved his face into the snow, gasping loudly, "Gods, that's cold!"

Edek laughed his peculiar high-pitched giggle. "Of course it's cold, you city rat! Cold and pure. Now you are ready to face Ulonora."

"Time is wasting," Sandor said. "Lucas, dry your hands and face and put your goggles on. Edek, are you finished with your heathen rituals?"

"I am, Captain. You would do well to appease Ulonora as well."

"Not bloody likely."

Moving to his own sled, Sandor strapped his saber to the sled's side-rail. The sword hilt sat within easy reach of his right hand. The others were similarly armed. Edek's rukie sword hung at his belt. A bow and a quiver of arrows were strapped to his back. Callia wore a pair of short curving blades low on her hips. Niccolo had his long sword, and Lucas carried a long, slender dagger at his waist.

Sandor settled his goggles into place, reducing the world to two thin horizontal strips. He pulled his facemask up over his chin and nose. The others did likewise, except for Edek. With a shake of his head at the rukie's bare head and unbuttoned coat, Sandor motioned the caravan forward. He gripped the handles and shoved the sled out of the sled house. The guards crisply saluted as they passed.

Out on the open plain, the wind carved the snow into densely packed drifts. The steel runners sliced across the crusted snowpack. Over the whistling of the wind, Sandor heard the others fall into place behind him. He settled into a steady walk, a bit slower than he would have without Lucas. Callia would no doubt be impatient with the pace.

As Last Ditch fell behind them, Sandor felt his heart lift. The frozen wastes opened around him, pure and clean. The sky was a pristine blue as the caravan headed south and west. The landscape was a monotonous series of undulating drifts with an occasional rocky outcrop jutting up through the snow. Each of these rocks was like an old friend to Sandor. He navigated by them, setting a steady course towards Crystalmere. The wind was a constant companion, pushing at their backs as if in a hurry to reach its destination.

The morning passed uneventfully. Sandor kept a constant eye on the horizon for animals or rukies. He spotted a herd of woolebeasts moving parallel to their course, but they were far enough away not to be a problem. The giant beasts had fickle tempers and were best avoided.

At noon, Sandor called a halt in the shelter of two rounded boulders. Crouching out of the wind, the five sledders had a meager lunch of raw seal meat.

"How is he holding up?" Sandor asked Edek, nodding towards Lucas. Sandor noticed the rukie had finally buttoned up his parka and put on his goggles.

"He has much to learn. He needs to gain speed on the downward slopes so he doesn't need to push so hard on the upward slopes."

Sandor looked at Lucas, who blushed. "Listen to Edek. He's been doing this since before you were born."

Callia rose to her feet. "Captain, we need to get moving. At the pace we're going, it'll be midnight before we reach Two-Fist Rock."

The sledders continued on their journey at a quicker pace. Sandor felt his muscles stretch as his body settled into the comfortable rhythm. Through the slits in his goggles, Sandor watched for his landmarks, leading the caravan unerringly across the white expanse. His mentor, an old man named Yorik, had taught him the names of all the rocks, had shown him which ones to aim for, which ones had to be lined up just so, and which ones were the best shelters from the wind. Sandor smiled at the thought of the old man who had retired from sledding two seasons past and now manned the Blun River crossing. Yorik was an evil-tempered man with a foul mouth. He strung together curses into a form of poetry.

By late afternoon, Sandor had to push his group hard in order to reach Two-Fist Rock with enough daylight by which to set up camp. The sun was well on its way towards the horizon when the caravan pulled up next to the rock formation, a pair of huge stones vaguely shaped like two fists slamming together. Sandor pushed his sled up close to the rocks. He arched his back,

grimacing at the ache between his shoulder blades.

Callia pushed her sled up next to Sandor's. "What's the matter, Captain? Getting too old for this?"

"First day is always the hardest."

Lucas arrived next, followed closely by Niccolo and Edek. The three men parked their sleds in a neat row next to the other two.

Sandor said, "We've got two hours until nightfall. Edek, help Lucas with his shelter."

Sandor pulled a short-handled shovel from his sled. He began piling snow into a loose pile approximately twelve feet in diameter and three feet high. The others did likewise, making five piles in a semi-circle in the windward side of the rocks, with the sleds in the middle. When Sandor was finished, he carefully stepped into the middle of the pile and began digging a pit in the center, surrounded by a ring of snow. With the ease of long practice, he fashioned a raised sleeping platform next to a deeper well. From this deeper portion of the pit, he dug a hole in the outer bank of snow to serve as an entrance. As he worked, he kept an eye on Lucas, who was carefully watching Edek make his own shelter. The boy worked hard, mimicking Edek's technique.

Sandor crawled out through his entrance hole. Lashed to the side of his sled were twelve long, slender poles made of bone. These he spaced across the top of his snow pit. He then took a triangular piece of sealskin and spread it over the poles, making sure that one of the triangle's points fell across the shelter's opening. Lastly, Sandor used the snow he had dug out of the pit to pile on top of the sealskin. When he was finished, he had a hollow dome of snow with a single small entrance, just big enough for him to crawl inside.

As the others finished their shelters, Sandor began preparing dinner. From a skin of seal oil, he filled a shallow clay dish. Callia handed him a long moss wick from a waterproof pouch she carried inside her coat. Sandor placed the wick in the dish of oil. "Edek," he said. "Can you light this?"

Edek was helping Lucas pile snow atop his shelter. "Of course, Captain." The rukie knelt beside the dish. He held the wick between his thumb and forefinger as he hummed softly to himself, rocking from side to side with his eyes closed. Sandor watched, ignoring the vague unease in his stomach. He noticed Lucas was watching Edek as well. A bright yellow flame burst from between Edek's fingers. The wick burned with a warm, steady glow.

Lucas's mouth fell open. "How...how did you do that?"

"Edek is a useful man to have around," Niccolo noted dryly. "I've tried to get him to teach me that, but he starts talking about tension and lines of force and opposing energy, and I fall asleep." Niccolo shrugged. "It's magic, boy. The rukies learn it from birth."

"That is true," Edek said. "My grandfather taught me how to call forth fire."

"Magic? Really? Can you teach me?"

"I can try. Perhaps after we eat."

"What are we eating, Captain?" Niccolo asked. "Venison steaks in brown gravy with warm bread and garlic potatoes?"

"Actually no. I was thinking seal meat. Same as tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that."

Niccolo sank to the ground with a dramatic sigh. "Well, at least it will be hot."

Sandor set up a small tripod from which he suspended an iron kettle. Callia scooped handfuls of snow inside it, then hung it over the oil lamp. Within a few minutes, the snow melted. Then Sandor dropped chunks of raw seal meat and salt into the water.

Lucas's face was downcast as he sat next to the bubbling kettle. "Do we really eat the same thing every day?"

"You tired of seal meat already?" Niccolo asked. "We're just getting started! You've got two more weeks of this."

Callia stirred the water. "When we get to Crystalmere, we'll be able to have a real campfire. We usually try to catch a rabbit or a ptarmigan. If we're lucky, there might be a few elaberries left. After Crystalmere though, it's seal meat until we reach the Blun River crossing. Yorik will have something else for us to eat there."

"I hope you remembered to bring his bottle of Argan red," Niccolo said. "The one time I forgot, he cursed me until my ears blistered."

"It's in the sled," Sandor said. "I'd rather forget my boots than Yorik's wine."

When the food was ready, the five sledders hunkered down around the oil lamp, savoring what warmth they could absorb from the food and from the lamp. They took turns spearing chunks of meat from the kettle while passing around a water skin.

By the time dinner was finished, the sun was almost down. "Time for your magic lesson," Edek told Lucas. The boy sat up eagerly. Edek took out his dagger and stuck it hilt-deep into the snow. "There," he said, grinning. "There is your lesson."

Lucas stared at the dagger hilt, then up at Edek. "I don't get it."

"Look at the dagger's shadow."

"All right." Lucas paused. "I still don't get it."

"The dagger and its shadow, the real and the unreal. Where the two forces meet, that is the source of all magic."

Lucas pointed to where the dagger's shadow reached out across the snow. "Here?"

"Yes. Magic comes from change, from the movement across boundaries, from one state of being to another."

"I warned you, boy," Niccolo said. "This is the part where I fall asleep."

Edek ignored the interruption. "I was able to call forth the fire for the lamp because of the time. Dusk is a time of powerful magic, when day changes to night."

"But how—"

"Enough lessons for tonight," Sandor said. "We need to get to sleep." Sandor set the watch schedule. He gave Lucas the first shift, with instructions to keep moving in order to stay warm and awake.

Sandor and the others each lit a stub of wax candle from the oil lamp, then crawled into their shelters. Sandor pulled the flap of sealskin hide over the hole behind him. With a tired groan, he lay down on the raised platform he'd carved into the snow. He leaned over and stuck the candle into the snow by the door. The heat from the candle, coupled with his own body heat, would eventually raise the temperature in the shelter to around the freezing point. The warmer air would rise up to the platform where Sandor slept, with the colder air sinking down into the well by the entrance.

Sandor lay back on his makeshift bed. The thick walls of the shelter muffled all sound except for the incessant howling of the wind. He was nervous about Lucas keeping the watch, but he knew how important it was to show confidence in the boy. Knowing his own shift would be coming sooner than he wanted, he put the worries out of his mind and drifted off to sleep.

He was awakened some time later by Callia's voice. Groggy, Sandor rubbed his eyes. His candle was almost burned out, leaving nothing but a guttering flame in a puddle of wax in the snow. Stumbling in the near-darkness, Sandor crawled outside. The bitter pre-dawn air cut at

his exposed skin like a knife. Cursing, Sandor pulled up his hood and facemask.

"I don't usually have to wake you," Callia said. She was nothing more than a shadowy form in the darkness.

"Sorry," Sandor whispered. "Anything to report?"

"I heard some wolves earlier, but they never got very close. Otherwise, it's been quiet."

"Good. How did Lucas do?"

"He did fine. When Edek got up for his shift, he said the boy was awake and alert. I'm going to catch a few hours of sleep." Callia slipped into her own shelter, leaving Sandor alone.

Wrapping his arms around his chest, Sandor paced around the camp. The only light came from the near-full moon and the millions of stars strewn across the sky like chips of ice. Completing his circuit of the camp, Sandor heaved a weary sigh, leaned against Two-Fist Rock and waited for dawn.

The hours passed, and the sky in the east brightened. The white domes of the shelters slowly became more distinct as light crept back into the world. When the sun finally showed itself, Sandor woke the others. Grumbling, cursing, and shivering, the sledders crawled from their shelters. The team ate a quiet breakfast of cold meat and cheese. When they were finished eating, they struck camp, first knocking down the snow shelters in order to recover the long poles and the tarps. They repacked the sleds, moving slowly to ease their stiff, cold muscles. By the time the sun was fully above the horizon, they were ready to move on. Sandor again led the way across the snowpack with the others in a line behind him.

The second day of the journey passed much the same as the first, with stops at mid-morning and noon for food and water. The weather stayed clear, but Sandor noticed a dark gray smudge in the western sky that promised snow in another day or two. He hoped they could reach the shelter of Crystalmere before it hit.

The team camped that night in a depression in the earth protected from the wind. Sandor watched approvingly as Lucas built his shelter for the night with only a few suggestions from Edek.

By the morning of the third day, Sandor felt his body settling into the routine of the journey. His back hurt less, and he woke on time for his watch shifts. He was anxious to reach Crystalmere that evening. The thought of a blazing fire and something other than seal for dinner was tantalizing. He could see the same thought in the others' faces as well. They all moved a bit quicker breaking camp. Instead of the usual tired silence, there were laughs from Niccolo and Edek as they played an old trick on Lucas. When the boy crawled inside his shelter to get his gloves, they quickly pulled the support poles out from the sides of his snow dome. The weight of the snow collapsed the roof, burying Lucas beneath a foot of snow.

Niccolo and Edek roared with laughter as Lucas pulled himself out, caked with snow and sputtering with good-natured indignation. Lucas retaliated with several well-placed snowballs, pelting Niccolo in the face, and Edek in the chest. Callia watched with disdain. "Men," she muttered, spitting out the word as if it were a curse.

By early afternoon that day, Sandor could see the wooded shores of Crystalmere in the distance, a dark green smear across the white landscape. The gray clouds in the west had grown ominously larger in the past day. Sandor calculated the snowfall would arrive by midnight. Anxious to reach the lake, Sandor pushed on a bit faster.

"*Saduka*!"

Edek's shrill cry sent a stab of fear up Sandor's spine. He skidded to a halt, pulled his saber from its sheath, and dropped into a crouch. "Where is he?" he yelled, scanning the horizon.

The others had stopped and drawn their weapons as well.

Edek pointed to the north, up a long, gradual rise. A solitary figure could be seen running down the slope, a sword in one hand, a long slender tube in the other. The wind carried his voice to Sandor's ears. The man was singing.

"He has a blowgun, Captain," Callia said, her voice calm, a wicked, curving blade in each hand.

"I see it. Take him down, Edek!" Sandor said.

Edek nocked an arrow to his bow, drew and fired. The arrow flew in a long arc, landing well short of the charging figure, who was now about fifty yards away. Edek waited for a brief lull between wind gusts, then fired again. The second arrow was closer, landing only a few feet in front of the target.

"Come on, Edek," Niccolo yelled. "Don't let him get any closer."

Sandor turned to Lucas, pleased to see the boy crouching down behind his sled with his dagger in his hand.

The figure was only twenty yards away when Edek fired a third time. The man was raising his blowgun to his lips when Edek's arrow hit him in the chest. He slowly dropped to the ground. Callia leapt up and ran to the fallen man. She reached him just as he managed to get back on his knees. Callia's blades slashed twice, sending sprays of red blood across the snow.

Sandor breathed a sigh of relief. "Edek, come with me. Niccolo, you and Lucas stay with the sleds."

Sandor and Edek ran up the slope to join Callia, who was wiping her blades clean on the snow. The dead man was a rukie, his bald head covered with swirling tattoos.

"Damn fool," Callia said. "Attacking an armed caravan by himself. Why do your people *do* this?"

Edek knelt next to the man. "*Saduka* is a sacred tradition, a way to gain honor and status in the eyes of the clan."

"Fools," Callia said again, moving back to the sleds.

"Let's go, Edek," Sandor said quietly. "The wolves can have him."

"Wait, Captain," Edek said, frowning. He was studying the dead rukie's coat and weapons. The sword was similar in design to Edek's. The blowgun in his other hand was made of a hollow shaft of bone. The black poisoned tip of a dart jutted from the opening.

Sandor knelt down next to Edek. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure this was *saduka*. This man's weapon is of fine quality, as are his coat and boots."

"I don't understand. What do his boots have to do with anything?"

"*Saduka* is the final resort of the desperate, the poor, the outcast. It is a man's final chance at honor when all else is lost. This man had no need for *saduka*. And this..." Edek touched an intricate piece of beadwork hanging from the man's parka. Red beads interspersed with white ptarmigan feathers fell in a long tangle, tied with black thread.

Sandor was losing patience. "We don't really have time for this, Edek. If you have a point, let's hear it."

Edek looked up at Sandor, his face grim. "It is possible this man was a scout."

Sandor stood up and scanned the area. "There!" he hissed, pointing to the south. A league away, Sandor spied four figures standing in the shadow of a rocky outcrop. At this distance it was impossible to make out any details, but it was clear they were rukies.

Realizing they had been spotted, the figures turned and ran, soon disappearing behind the

rolling hills.

"By the north winds of Ulonora," Edek said softly.

"What? Who was that?"

Edek untied the red beads, stared at them for a moment, and then looked up at Sandor. Sandor had never seen such fear and confusion in the normally stoic man's face. "My clan," Edek said. "It took them fifteen years, but they finally found me."

* * *

Sandor pushed the caravan on, leaving the dead body where it lay. He tried to keep his focus on the trail, but his mind kept wandering back to Edek's words. The rukie's past was a bit of a mystery around Last Ditch, but that in itself was not unusual. Many of the town's citizens, Sandor included, were fleeing something. The rukie had made a good life for himself, and was well-respected in the town. Whatever ghosts from his past were rising up to haunt him, he had Sandor's pity. He just hoped Edek could keep his mind on the task at hand.

The forests of Crystalmere met the travelers as the sun sank in the west. Sandor found the trail through the towering snow-covered pines leading to the lakeshore. The trail was wide and well-traveled. Loggers from Last Ditch used it to haul lumber back to the town.

Sandor topped a slight rise. The trees parted to reveal the placid blue waters of Crystalmere. Warmed by underground springs, the lake never froze. On this side, the ground sloped gently down to the water's edge. On the far side of the lake, the hills were steeper, their rocky sides bare of trees. The view was stunning. The colors were bright and primal—the blue of the water, the green of the trees, the white of the snow.

Relishing the warmer temperatures caused by the lake, Sandor pulled down his facemask and drew back his hood. With the trees blocking the wind, the air was almost comfortable.

The caravan reached the water where a huge spike of rock burst from the ground like an accusatory finger. At its base was an open space sheltered from above by an overhanging shelf of rock. Not quite deep enough to be considered a cave, the overhang was a common camping spot for travelers to and from Last Ditch. The remnants of many campfires were scattered across the area.

Sandor pushed his sled under the rock shelf, then stretched his back muscles, grimacing as his spine cracked. "Edek and Lucas, you have firewood duty," he said. "Get plenty of wood. If that storm hits during the night, we may get stuck here for another day. Callia and I will set up the lean-tos. Niccolo, think you can find us a rabbit or two for dinner?"

Niccolo grinned. "Ah, the wily rabbit! I'll bring down the fearsome beast, and we'll dine like kings!"

Callia said, "I've got a silverpiece that says you come back with nothing but some pinecones."

"I'll take that bet!" Niccolo roared with indignation. "No rabbit can outsmart the likes of Niccolo A'relis!"

The group moved off to their various chores. Sandor and Callia gathered long branches for the lean-tos. They built five of them in a semi-circle, with the open sides facing the fire in order to capture the warmth. The work was tedious, and his gloves were soon caked with sticky sap, but Sandor was thankful not to have to build a snowdome.

Edek and Lucas soon returned with armfuls of wood, which they stacked carefully beneath the overhang. Edek paused a moment to start a fire. Lucas watched with rapt attention as the

rukie cast his magic. The fire burst into life between Edek's fingers. The boy shook his head with wide-eyed wonder.

"Come, boy, we'll need more wood than this." Lucas trailed after Edek, pestering him with questions about magic.

"The boy is holding up well," Callia said quietly as she prepared a kettle of water over the crackling flames.

Sandor nodded. With the exception of the rukie attack that afternoon, the trip had gone smoothly so far. Lucas was adapting to the rigors of life on the snowpack; he hadn't slowed them down at all, he didn't complain about his chores, and he learned quickly. "He'll make a good sledder. He has the right personality—smart and stubborn."

A hint of a smile pulled at Callia's mouth, as much humor as Sandor ever saw the woman show. "Smart? I'm not sure about that. How smart can any of us be, camping beneath a rock with a snowstorm bearing down on us? If we were smart, we'd be back at Allie's tavern, drinking a brew in front of the fire."

"A fair point. Do you think you'll miss it? When you quit?"

Callia snorted with disgust. "Quit? Why would I ever quit? What else would I do? I'll push a damn sled until somebody makes me stop, and hopefully I'll be dead before that happens." She eyed Sandor closely. "Why? You thinking about quitting?"

Sandor managed a weak smile. "Whenever I stand downwind of Niccolo. The man smells like a snowbear carcass."

"Speaking of that great windy imbecile, should I put seal meat on to boil, or will he come back with some rabbits?"

"Give him a chance, Callia. He may surprise us."

Ten minutes later, as Callia was getting ready to cut seal meat chunks into the boiling water, Edek and Lucas returned with more firewood. Walking between them was Niccolo, grinning from ear to ear with three white-furred rabbits clutched in his fist. "The great hunter returns!" he bellowed, brandishing the rabbits over his head.

Callia muttered a vile curse.

The other men laughed as Niccolo dropped the rabbits beside the fire. "Now, my good lady, I believe we had a wager?"

Scowling, Callia flipped a silverpiece in the air. Niccolo caught it deftly. He opened his mouth to say something, but Sandor cut him off. "I'd keep quiet if I were you. Gloating is likely to get you a slit throat for your efforts." Niccolo pondered this, then nodded. Grinning, he stuffed the silverpiece in his pocket and bowed silently to Callia.

With the fire blazing, the travelers were able to remove their gloves and parkas. Edek showed Lucas how to hang his clothes up to dry, explaining to him how dangerous wet clothes could be. Callia skinned the rabbits, all the while complaining about how skinny they were.

Niccolo took her criticisms with his usual good grace. "Milady, if you wanted *plump* rabbits, that would have cost you another silverpiece. Besides, am I to be held responsible for the eating habits of the local wildlife? It's not *my* fault the rabbits don't eat."

Soon Callia had rabbit stew simmering over the fire. After three days of seal meat, the smell was mouthwatering. Lucas disappeared, then returned a few minutes later with a pot full of elaberries. "I found the bush when we were getting firewood. They're past ripe, but hopefully they're still good." His discovery was met with loud cheers, drawing a blush to the boy's face. Fresh fruit was a rare delicacy.

The food and the warm fire raised their spirits. The rabbit meat was tough and stringy and the elaberries were sour, but Sandor thought it the finest meal he had eaten in many days.

As the darkness drew in close around the campsite, Sandor noticed Edek was unusually quiet. The rukie had said little since they reached Crystalmere. Sandor considered leaving Edek to his thoughts, but decided it was too important and might affect the group. "Edek," he said. "Tell me about the rukie that attacked us today."

A pained look crossed Edek's face. "Captain...I would rather not talk about it."

Niccolo looked up with surprise. "What's to tell? *Saduka*, right? Just another crazy rukie trying to kill himself."

"Edek indicated there might be more to it than that. Isn't that right, Edek? I don't want to pry, but this is important. We're your traveling companions. We have a right to know."

Edek heaved a deep sigh. "Yes, you are right, Captain. There is danger here. Mostly for me, but for you as well. It is not an easy story for me to tell, but I will try. I don't believe that attack was *saduka*. The man's clothing and weapons were of fine quality. *Saduka* is for the poor and the desperate, a way to regain honor and wealth in the clan."

"To me, it looks more like a good way to get killed," Niccolo remarked.

"Yes, it usually means death, but it is an honorable death. The man who attacked us was not poor. I believe he was a scout, testing our defenses and trying to identify me."

"Why you?" Sandor asked.

Edek ran a hand over his bald head, with a deep frown on his weathered face. "When I left my clan all those years ago, it was not by choice. There was a dispute involving my family and another family. We were not wealthy. We were not warriors or priests or elders. My father was a fisherman, and my mother sewed fishing nets. My parents worked hard for us, always making sure my sisters and I had clothes and food. When I came of age, I got into a feud with a priest named Brilik, a follower of the Wind Goddess. He was a wealthy, powerful man in our clan. I was forced to flee. I became a *horala*—an outcast. A criminal."

"What was the argument about?" Lucas asked.

"A woman?" Niccolo guessed.

"A woman," Edek said.

Niccolo shook his head sadly. "I knew it. It's *always* a woman."

"This wasn't just any woman. Her name was Eria and she was the priest's daughter. She was beautiful, with eyes as blue as the winter sky over the Gerin Straits. We were in love, but Brilik would not allow it to continue, so we met in secret. When she grew with child, her father was furious. He tried to have me executed, but I hid from him. So he punished Eria instead, nearly beating her to death. My anger made me foolish. I attacked Brilik."

"Did you kill him?" Callia asked. "Sounds like he deserved it."

"I...I thought I had. I stabbed him through the stomach. Such wounds are almost always fatal. As he lay bleeding, he called down a curse on me, and I fled. I ran into the wilderness, chased by my own people. For many years I ran, always looking behind me. Ten years later I settled in Last Ditch. I have lived there now for five years. I thought myself safe."

Sandor popped a handful of elaberries in his mouth, wincing at the sour tang. "Are you suggesting this rukie who attacked us is from your clan? That they're still chasing you, fifteen years later?"

Edek held up the beadwork he had taken from the rukie's corpse. "This is the symbol of Ulonora. This black thread here means a...I'm not sure of the word. In my language, the word

is *intun*. It means revenge, but more than that. A revenge that goes beyond all reason. Revenge that will be pursued to death and to the lands beyond death, to the gates of the halls of Melenek."

"Vendetta?" Sandor suggested. "Is that the word you're looking for?"

"I know this word. It is close, but not quite. *Intun* is a sickness of the mind. Nothing else in life matters. After getting his vengeance, a man with *intun* will often kill himself, finding his life has no other purpose."

Niccolo spoke up, "So, just because you got his daughter pregnant, this priest has been chasing you for fifteen years? Edek, I've probably left behind dozens of pregnant women in my life, and none of them have ever chased after me."

"Maybe you weren't worth chasing after," Callia noted.

Niccolo shot Callia a venomous look, then turned back to Edek. "I don't get it. It's just another bastard child in a world full of bastards. What's one more?"

"You have an interesting way of viewing the world, Niccolo, but it is often not as simple as you make it seem. Brilik had planned to marry Eria to an elder from another clan. The marriage would have given him more power, more wealth. The other man likely refused the marriage after Eria became pregnant. But even worse than the failed marriage is the fact that I attacked Brilik. The priests of the Wind Goddess are holy. To touch them is to defile the Goddess herself. To attack a priest, to draw blood...it is an unthinkable sin."

"And this Brilik is the one who attacked us today?" Niccolo asked.

"No, that was not Brilik. The man who attacked us was an apprentice. The Captain and I saw four men to the south. They were too far away to be sure, but perhaps one of them was Brilik."

Niccolo frowned. "I don't like this. We have a trip to make, and we don't need some angry rukie priest chasing after us."

"Relax, Niccolo," Sandor said. "We don't know that's who it was, and besides, there were only four of them. We can handle it." Sandor stood and stretched. "That's enough fireside stories for one evening. Let's get to bed."

"Should we double the watch, Captain?" Callia asked.

"No, standard watch. Lucas, you've got the first shift."

The wind rustled the trees and kicked up eddies of loose snow. The stars and moon were hidden by a thick layer of clouds. The storm looked like it was settling in. Sandor was thankful they weren't out in the open plain. "Lucas, keep the fire going. We've got plenty of wood to get us through the night. And watch for sparks. I don't want my lean-to catching on fire."

"Yes, Captain." Lucas smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Everything all right, Lucas?" Sandor asked quietly. The others were settling into their blankets and were out of earshot.

"Just worried about Edek's story. I'm not scared of storms or wolves or snowbears. But I've never fought a man before. If it comes to that --"

"It won't. And if does, just stick close to me or to Callia. Not Niccolo, though. When he gets in a fight, he goes a little berserk."

"How is that any different from his normal behavior?"

Sandor snorted laughter. "It's a subtle difference. Keep a sharp eye, and wake me if there's trouble."

"Yes, Captain."

Sandor crawled beneath his lean-to, enjoying the warmth of the nearby fire. He wished he

could see the stars. Crystalmere was the only waypoint on the trip where he was able to sleep in the open instead of in a dark, cramped snow shelter. With a sigh, he rolled over and fell asleep.

By the time Sandor woke for his shift, the storm had dropped a foot of snow with no sign of stopping. The wind shrieked and howled through the trees. Sandor could hear the waves crashing against the rocky shore.

"Beautiful night, eh?" Sandor noted as he rubbed sleep from his eyes.

Callia tossed a log on the fire, sending a fountain of sparks shooting up into the sky. "Better here than out in the open. That wind would be brutal." Callia paused on her way to her lean-to. "Captain..."

"Yes?" Sandor sat down near the fire, looking up at her curiously.

"What if Edek is right about the rukie priest?"

Sandor shrugged. "We're not going to turn back. We'll push on, and if an attack comes, then we'll be ready for it."

She squatted down next to Sandor, her voice low. "It seems to me this priest is after only Edek, not the rest of us."

"Are you saying we should abandon Edek?"

Callia frowned. "I know how it sounds, but we have to think about the caravan and the town. That takes priority over—"

"No," Sandor said, his voice sharp. "And I'll not speak on the subject again."

Callia rose, her face pinched with anger. Without a word, she crawled into her lean-to. Sandor sighed, poking at the fire with a stick. He regretted his harsh tone, but he had to make himself clear. Callia was hard, pragmatic, and unsentimental. That's what made her such a valuable team member, but it was also why Borne had never given her command of her own caravan.

Sandor hunched in front of the crackling fire. The wind prowled around the edges of the campsite like a snowbear hunting prey. He set a kettle of water over the fire to make tea, settling in for his shift.

The thick clouds obscured the sunrise. Only a general lightening of the sky from black to dusky gray indicated that morning had arrived. All during his shift, Sandor had watched the growing snow pile on top of Niccolo's lean-to, wondering which snowflake would deliver the final blow and collapse the structure. As Sandor prepared breakfast, the pivotal snowflake finally fell. With a groan and a dull thud, the branches snapped, dumping a heavy pile of wet snow on Niccolo's sleeping form.

The noise of Niccolo's thrashing and muffled yells instantly woke Edek and Callia, who were up and alert in an instant, emerging from their lean-tos with weapons in hand. But they soon relaxed when they saw Sandor doubled over with laughter, and Niccolo swearing and sputtering as he dug himself out. Lucas crawled out of his lean-to, his eyes bleary with sleep. He quickly suppressed his grin when he saw Niccolo's indignant face. Edek cackled his high-pitched laugh as he moved to help Niccolo. Callia merely smirked and shook her head.

"Gods be damned, who built this anyway?" Niccolo muttered, brushing the snow off his parka. Then he turned on Edek, "I don't need your help, you damned rukie!"

Edek, still grinning, backed away with his hands spread wide.

"Easy, Niccolo," Sandor said. "It was just bad luck. The wind funneled the snow between those two trees, piling it on your lean-to."

"And I suppose you never noticed until now?"

Sandor fought to keep a straight face. “Oh, I noticed it several hours ago. I made a bet with myself that the branches would hold until dawn. And see, I was right!”

This sent Edek into more gales of laughter. Niccolo’s face was turning dark red.

Sandor flipped Niccolo an empty water skin. “Go fill this up at the lake, and don’t come back until you cool off. Lucas, go with him.” Lucas opened his mouth to protest, but Sandor cut him off. “Do it. Nobody leaves the campsite alone.”

Sandor’s remark had a sobering effect on the group. Edek stopped giggling as Lucas and Niccolo tramped off through the newly drifted snow banks.

“What’s your plan, Captain?” Callia asked. “Are we going to wait out the storm?”

Sandor scratched at the stubble on his cheeks as he peered up at the sky. Light snow was still falling, and the wind blew as fiercely as ever, but it would be at their backs as they walked. “We’ll take time to eat a decent breakfast, then get moving. We’ll plan on reaching Thumbstone tonight. That will put us only a few hours behind schedule.” What Sandor didn’t add was that Thumbstone was a more defensible position than the usual waypoint. He didn’t have to say it, though; Callia knew Sandor’s strategy. Her eyes narrowed, and she glanced at Edek, but she wisely kept quiet.

After Lucas and Niccolo returned, the sled team ate breakfast and prepared to continue the journey. When all the gear was stowed back in the sleds, Sandor said, “Keep close together. Don’t get separated.”

Sandor led the others on a path to the south. Beneath an iron gray sky and a few swirling snowflakes, the caravan left the forests of Crystalmere behind, heading back out onto the open plains.

* * *

With only a short stop for a midday meal, the caravan made good time across the snowpack. Sandor kept a brisk pace, pushing harder than he had previously. He worried about Lucas, but the boy seemed to be holding up well.

The Iron Tooth Mountains were only a blue shadow. Between Crystalmere and the mountains was the Blun River, a two-day journey from the lake. Sandor planned to push the group hard the next day to make the river crossing. It would make for a long day from Thumbstone, but they wouldn’t have to worry about setting up camp once they reached the river. Yorik would shelter them for the night.

By mid-afternoon, Thumbstone, a towering narrow spire of rock jutting up from atop a tall hill, was visible on the horizon. Except for a gentle slope on the eastern face, the other sides of the hill consisted of an impassable jumble of sharp rocks. Typically, Sandor used a different waypoint, since the top of the hill was exposed to the wind and made for a poor campsite. However, with only the single path to the top, Thumbstone could be easily defended by a small group of people.

With much swearing and groaning, the companions pushed their sleds to the top of the hill, lining them up at the base of the rocky spire. The group built their snow shelters in a tight circle. When they were finished, Sandor paused to survey the area with what little sunlight remained. The hill offered a spectacular view for several miles in every direction. In the gathering darkness, Sandor saw only snow and rocks.

“No fire tonight,” Sandor instructed. Callia paused from taking the oil lamp out of the sled,

a questioning look on her face. "We're too exposed up here. The light will be visible for miles."

"Not even a hot meal tonight?" Niccolo groaned.

"You'll survive."

Callia and the men huddled in the open space in the middle of their shelters, trying to keep out of the wind. They ate a cheerless meal of smoked meat washed down with water. There was little conversation. With no oil lamp, there was barely enough light to see each other.

"Niccolo, you have first watch tonight," Sandor said when they were done eating. "I don't have to tell you all to keep a sharp lookout. Keep your weapons close. If you see *anything*, raise the alarm."

Callia and Edek disappeared into their shelters while Niccolo took up his post at the top of the path leading down from the hilltop. Sandor put a hand on Lucas's shoulder. "You all right?" Sandor asked quietly.

Lucas nodded. "So far. Do you really think Edek's priest is following us?"

"I don't know."

Lucas's voice dropped to a whisper. "Niccolo thinks we should leave Edek behind."

"He said that?"

"This morning, when we went down to the lake to get water. He said we shouldn't get involved, and that the caravan is more important than any one member."

Sandor nodded. "I see. And what do you think?"

The boy was quiet for a long moment. Finally, he said, "I think if it were me, I wouldn't want to put my companions in danger. But I would also be scared. We're all alone out here. All we have is each other. I wouldn't want to die out here by myself."

"Well said, Lucas. That's why we're not going to leave Edek behind, despite what Niccolo says. Edek himself may try to convince us to leave because of his damnable pride. The four of you are under my command, and we *will* stay together. Now, get to sleep. It's going to be a long, hard push tomorrow."

Sandor crawled into his snow shelter, thankful to be out of the cutting wind. Groaning at the various aches in his body, he settled back on his blanket. Only four days out from Last Ditch and already he missed his bed. He reached inside his parka, feeling for his pouch of gold coins. The wind roared outside, lulling him to sleep.

"*Captain*!"

Lucas's piercing cry woke Sandor. He bolted upright, smacking his face into the ceiling of his shelter. Cursing, he rolled off his blanket and out of the snow shelter, tearing out a huge chunk of the wall in the process.

It was an hour or two past midnight. The clouds had finally moved on, revealing a bright moon that blanketed the world in a soft white glow. Callia, Niccolo, and Edek were dark shapes rising up from their own shelters.

"Lucas, where are you?" Sandor asked.

"Over here!" The boy's voice came from the top of the path.

Sandor stepped out of the circle of shelters into the open. He stopped, his breath coming in a quick gasp.

"By all the gods," Callia muttered next to him.

Spread out in a wide half-circle surrounding the base of the hill were at least thirty men carrying torches. From this height, Sandor could see nothing of them except shadows. The torches danced in the wind.

"Dammit, boy, aren't you supposed to be on watch?" Niccolo growled.

Lucas sounded defensive. "I was. I never saw or heard anything. One minute there was nobody out there, then all of a sudden, the torches all burst into flame, and there they were."

"Bah, you were asleep!"

"No I wasn't!"

Edek spoke up, his voice hushed. "No, he was not asleep. My people can move quietly. They would have surrounded the hill before any of us knew they were there."

"Are you saying that's your priest out there?" Sandor asked.

Before Edek could reply, a deep voice boomed out of the darkness. "Edek of the White Claw! I come for your death!"

With a grim smile, Edek nodded. "So it would seem."

"What do we do, Captain?" Lucas asked.

"I don't know yet." Sandor stepped up to the top of the path. "What do you want?" he yelled.

The deep voice replied, "Edek! Do you hide behind your companions? Their deaths are on your hands. Surrender to us, and they will be spared."

Sandor glanced over at Callia, who refused to meet his gaze. Sandor had no doubts what she was thinking.

Edek moved forward, his hand on his sword. "Captain, I must go—."

"Quiet, Edek. Don't even think about it. If these fools want to attack, they'll find a cold death waiting for them at the top of this hill. I want you over there with your bow. There's plenty of moonlight to pick out your targets. Callia, hide behind that large rock halfway down the hill. Once the first few men are past your position, make your attack. Niccolo and I will be waiting for them at the top. Lucas, you stay next to Edek. Protect him if anyone gets past me and Niccolo. His bow could make the difference in this fight. They'll have blowguns and poison darts, so keep low, and don't give them a target. They'll be looking up at us against the bulk of Thumbstone. That's to our favor. We'll be black shadows against a black background. Questions?"

When no one spoke, Sandor nodded. With a deep breath, he yelled, "If you wish to die, by all means, come on up!"

At least twenty of the men below doused their torches and began moving towards the hill. Edek slid off to the side, his bow in his hand, Lucas at his side. Sandor and Niccolo squatted down at the top of the path. Sandor turned to Callia, but she was already gone from sight, slipping down the hill between the rocks.

Niccolo whistled quietly. "She's good," he muttered. "Where did she learn to move like that?"

"She used to be an assassin," Sandor whispered.

Niccolo swore beneath his breath. "You mean all those times I teased her and argued with her..."

"She could have easily slit your throat, broken your neck, strangled you, or any of a hundred other things."

"Remind me to be a bit nicer to her from now on. So what's our role here, Captain?"

"Simple. As they move up the hill, Edek keeps up a steady stream of arrows. Callia attacks from the flank, causing confusion in their ranks. They'll charge up the hill at a run, where they meet us."

Niccolo flexed his arm, his sword gleaming in the moonlight. "I like it."

"I thought you might." The rukies were already halfway up the hill, moving steadily. "All right, Edek, fire."

The hiss of an arrow was followed by a grunt of pain. The lead rukie dropped to his knees. His companions moved around him, continuing up the hill.

Sandor drew his saber, a soothing, familiar weight in his hand. After a moment's consideration, he pulled his obdurium dagger with his left hand. He didn't often fight with two weapons, but the battle was certain to be up-close and bloody.

Immediately after drawing the dagger, he felt a strange sensation, a thrumming vibration that seemed to move from his feet, up through his body, and into his left hand. It wasn't painful. In fact, just the opposite—it felt strong and powerful, like he was holding a bolt of lightning in his hand.

He had no time to ponder the situation. Edek dropped two more attackers, and as Sandor had predicted, the rukies began running up the hill. A muffled shout followed by several confused cries told Sandor that Callia had made her move. Even with the bright moonlight, it was difficult to tell exactly what was happening. Already Sandor could see five bodies lying in the snow. More cries, then a shriek cut off with a sickening gurgle indicated a sixth casualty. Callia was brutally efficient.

The remaining rukies were approaching a panic. With a half-hearted cry, they charged up the remaining slope towards Niccolo and Sandor. The narrow path allowed only two rukies to stand side-by-side. The one on the left lunged at Sandor, who easily parried the thrust with his saber. Before the rukie could regain his footing, Sandor's left arm shot out, the obdurium dagger humming fiercely. The blade punched into the man's chest. The impact sent the rukie flying backwards through the air, knocking over the men behind him.

Sandor stared in awe at the dagger. Is this what all obdurium weapons felt like? The high-pitched buzz of a dart flying past his ear jerked him out of his reverie.

Another attacker had already taken the place of the fallen man. This rukie approached slowly, his long-handled sword held low. He hacked a vicious slice at Sandor, who caught the blade on the hilt of his saber. The rukie pulled back, then thrust again, aiming for Sandor's chest. Sandor shifted to the side, then chopped down with his dagger. With a dull crack, the dagger sliced through the rukie's steel blade.

The rukie drew back, his eyes wide as he stared at the shattered remnant of his sword. Sandor lashed out with his saber, catching the man in the throat. Blood flew in a dark spray.

To Sandor's right, Niccolo was laughing and taunting the rukies, urging them on. Already two bodies lay at his feet. Niccolo's higher position on the hill, coupled with his longer reach, gave the rukies almost no chance. With surprising grace for a man his size, Niccolo neatly sidestepped a sword thrust, then drove his fist into his attacker's face. The man grunted in pain. Before he could recover, Niccolo buried his sword in the man's chest.

"Who's next?" Niccolo bellowed, but there was no one left to fight. The surviving rukies turned and fled back down the hill. Edek caught one in the shoulder with an arrow, spinning him around. As the man struggled to regain his footing, Callia appeared, seemingly materializing out of thin air. Her twin blades lashed out with deadly precision. The rukie toppled over without a sound.

"Damn," Niccolo muttered with reluctant admiration.

The rukies regrouped at the base of the hill. It was difficult to be certain, but Sandor estimated at least twelve dead.

"Lucas, are you all right?" Sandor asked.

"I'm fine, Captain," Lucas replied, his voice quiet but steady.

"EDEK!" A deep voice filled with rage boomed across the landscape.

"I'm here, Brilik," Edek yelled back. "Leave us in peace, or your men all die."

"I will hunt you the rest of your life! You will never escape! I will eat your heart!" Sandor couldn't tell which of the figures below was Brilik, but he guessed he was the tall one in the center of the group.

Edek walked over to Sandor. "Captain, this has to end," he whispered.

"I'm open to suggestions."

"Let me fight Brilik."

"Just the two of you?"

"It's the only way. He will follow us the entire way to Stonespur. Next time we might not be so lucky."

"Where would you fight him? Here?"

Edek paused to think it over. "No," he said. "The Standing Stones. That is a holy place."

"Edek, are you sure this is the only way? I don't want to see you killed over some stupid point of honor that should have been long forgotten."

"It is not stupid, Captain. I wronged Brilik, and now only the gods can resolve the matter. If I am judged innocent, I will be victorious. If not ..." Edek shrugged.

Sandor sighed. "Do it."

Edek nodded. "Brilik!" he yelled. "Let us end this. I challenge you to single combat!"

A long paused followed. Then, "Agreed! Name the place."

"Four days from now. South of the Blun River is a hill with a circle of tall stones."

"So be it, Edek of the White Claw! Prepare your soul for its journey to the halls of Melenek."

The figures below turned and disappeared into the darkness, leaving the five companions atop the lonely windswept hill.

* * *

None of them could sleep after the battle, so Sandor ordered the group to strike the camp. The sun was just brightening the eastern sky as they pushed the sleds into line. Sandor tugged his hood tight around his face.

"We make for the river crossing today," Sandor said. "It's going to be a long push to get there before dark, but I don't want to get caught in the open again."

"Captain," Edek said.

"What is it?"

Edek reached down to Sandor's waist. For one frantic moment, Sandor thought Edek had spotted his bag of gold coins. Instead, Edek plucked something from Sandor's coat, holding it up for him to see. It was a white feathered dart.

"It was caught in the folds of your coat," Edek noted with a grim smile. "A few inches to the left, and you would be dead. The poison is quick and painful."

Niccolo whistled. "You have the gods' own luck."

Sandor took the dart between his fingers, staring at the black tar-like substance coating its tip. With a grimace, he flicked it into the snow.

Niccolo and Lucas had already pushed the dead rukies out of the path, heaping them unceremoniously in a pile. Sandor pushed his sled past the bodies, wondering what madness would bring these men so far from their homes for the sake of revenge. Shaking his head, Sandor descended the hill, followed closely by the others. After they all reached the bottom, Sandor set a course to the southeast, towards Yorik and the Blun River crossing.

The caravaners trudged across the endless frozen wastes. The sky was a dazzling blue, but Sandor's own thoughts were dark. He had faced death many times before and since coming to Last Ditch, but something about that feathered dart unnerved him. To come so close to death, saved only by some fluke gust of wind, or some random movement of his body. Who could say how or why he was still alive, while those rukies lay in a bloody heap, waiting for the wolves?

The hills grew steeper as they approached the river. Rather than go over the crests, Sandor led a winding course around the hills, keeping to the low valleys. The danger in this method was getting lost, but Sandor knew his way.

The group ate a hurried lunch, then pushed on. Sandor raced against the setting sun. It was with a profound sense of relief that Sandor spotted the Blun River gorge only a few miles distant. He sighed. His legs ached, and his back flared with a pain that seemed to throb in time with each step he took. He thought of the warm bed and hot meal waiting for them at the river crossing. He leaned into the sled handles, waving the caravan forward.

Shadows were gathering in the valleys when the caravan finally reached the Blun River. The river cut through a canyon several hundred feet deep. The walls of the gorge were striated white, gray, and brown, carved by the river over the ages. The far side of the gorge was almost a hundred yards away. Below, the river itself was little more than a narrow gray ribbon.

Lucas pulled up next to Sandor. "How do we get across?" he asked.

"There," he pointed. Downstream a short ways from their position, a series of thick ropes spanned the gorge. The ropes were tied on the near side to a large pulley atop a wooden pole. The pole was as big around as a barrel, and went deep into the ground, providing a secure anchor. The ropes sloped downward, disappearing into a cave fifty feet down from the rim of the gorge.

"How do we get the sleds across the ropes?"

"You'll see." Sandor said, waving the group onward.

Surrounding the pole were twelve crude stone carvings in the likeness of various vile, sneering demons with horns, lolling tongues, and fangs.

"Ugh, what are these for?" Lucas asked.

"To scare away rukies," Callia said.

Sandor looked at Edek, whose face was wan behind his snow goggles. "Easy, Edek. You've seen Yorik's totems before."

"I know, Captain, but they are evil things."

Niccolo said to Lucas, "Yorik uses these statues to protect this side of the rope bridge. Can't have rukies coming along and cutting the ropes."

"Are they really that bad?" Lucas asked Edek. "They're ugly, but what makes them evil?"

Edek shook his head, obviously not wanting to explain. He stood apart from the others, his head down.

A brass bell hung on the pole. "Think Yorik is still awake?" Niccolo asked.

Sandor shrugged. "I hope so." He rang the bell loudly, the clear tones singing out across the gorge. Several minutes passed. Sandor crossed his arms and tapped his foot. The wind was bitterly cold, blowing at their backs with a fierce insistence. "Come on, Yorik," Sandor muttered.

One of the ropes began moving, turning around the creaking pulley. From the mouth of the cave, a large basket appeared, hanging from the rope. The group watched as the empty basket made its ponderous way across the gorge.

"We have to cross in that?" Lucas asked.

Niccolo laughed and clapped Lucas on the back. "Don't look so nervous. It's no worse than crossing the rope bridges in Last Ditch."

"I hate crossing the rope bridges," Lucas replied.

With a shuddering jerk, the basket reached the near side of the gorge. Niccolo and Edek grabbed the edges of the basket, holding it steady while Sandor motioned to Callia. The basket was just large enough for one sled at a time. "You first, Callia. Give Yorik our regards."

Callia opened a door in the side of the basket, pushed her sled inside, and closed the door behind her. "All right, let's get this over with." Her face was almost as pale as Lucas's.

"Have a safe trip," Niccolo said, grinning. "And don't look down." He shoved the basket off the edge of the gorge, making it swing wildly as it began its return trip. Callia's foul curses eventually faded, carried away by the wind. Niccolo shook his head. "Where did that woman learn to swear like that?"

The basket vanished into the cave opening, then reappeared a moment later, empty again. Edek crossed next, followed by Niccolo and Lucas. As Sandor stood on the edge of the gorge, waiting for the basket to return, he felt a sudden pang of loneliness. He looked around at the desolate landscape. For leagues in every direction was nothing but snow and rocks except for this one tiny outpost of civilization. The wind seemed to crawl inside his parka.

When the empty basket made its way back to him, Sandor climbed inside. Even having made this same crossing many times over the years, he closed his eyes and tried not to think of the river hundreds of feet below.

Within a few minutes, the trip was over, and the basket was descending into the cave. Torches lined the cavern walls, making shadows dance and flicker. The basket came to a halt at the back of the cave. The rest of the caravan team was there, waiting, along with another man. Stooped from age, Yorik still managed the river crossings by himself, hauling on the thick guide rope that pulled the basket back and forth.

Sandor opened the basket door and pulled his sled out onto the sandy floor of the cave. As always, he felt nervous in Yorik's presence. The man had been his commanding officer, his mentor, and his friend for decades.

"Sandor," Yorik said in his gravely voice. His gray beard hung down to his waist, and his hair was pulled back in a long braid. Beneath his bushy eyebrows, his eyes were clear and blue. "Didn't expect to see you again this season."

Sandor fought back a ridiculous urge to salute. "One last trip," he said, then quickly added. "Before the storm season, that is." He paused. "It's good to see you."

Yorik patted him on the shoulder, smiling. "You too, Captain. Looks like you have some new blood this trip." He peered at Lucas intently.

"This is Lucas."

Lucas nodded his greeting. Yorik frowned back. "Seems young. How's he holding up?"

"Well so far. We did run into some trouble with rukies though."

Yorik snorted his disdain. "Bah, savages. No offense, Edek."

Edek shrugged. "They probably think the same of you, Yorik."

"Ha! I'll bet they do. Well, come in. Let's find something to eat. You can tell me all about

your trip. And I assume you have something for me?"

Sandor dug into his sled and pulled out a bottle of Argan red wine. Yorik's eyes lit up. "Ah, bless you, boy. That will keep my old bones warm."

Leaving the sleds in the cavern, Yorik led the group into a side passage. The air in the caves was warm and dry. Sandor pulled back his hood and unbuttoned his parka. He felt the cold slowly drain out of his body.

The corridor opened up into a large, circular chamber lit with several seal oil lamps. Tattered rugs and animal skins covered the floor. The fireplace carved into the chamber wall was empty. "Sorry, no firewood," Yorik said by way of explanation. "It's getting too hard for me to climb down to the river to collect driftwood."

"We can try to collect some for you before we leave," Sandor said, but Yorik waved his hand dismissively.

"Don't bother. I've seal oil for cooking, and the caves stay plenty warm, even for an old man. Well, put your things away, make yourselves comfortable. You know where everything is. Callia, you can have my room, and I'll sleep with the others."

"That's not necessary," Callia protested.

"I'll not hear of it, a woman sleeping in the same room with four men. Not in my house."

"Don't worry about her," Niccolo said. "I'd feel safer with a snowbear in my room than Callia."

"And the snowbear would probably find you more attractive," Callia replied.

Sandor and the other men entered a side chamber. A dozen bunks lined the room, carved out of the stone walls.

"Why so many bunks?" Lucas asked as they all took off their coats and boots.

"Last Ditch used to run bigger caravans," Sandor explained. "Sometimes as many as fifteen men. This was years ago. They even tried using dogs to pull the sleds, but they ran into problems with the river crossing. The dogs wouldn't get into the basket. It's a twenty-mile walk downstream to find another place to cross. Also, the larger the caravan train, the more rukies it attracts. Eventually they decided that small, well-armed teams had more success."

Their gear stowed, they returned to the main chamber, where Callia soon rejoined them. Yorik set about cooking dinner with Callia's help. Sandor told Yorik about their encounter with Brilik, and about their meeting at the Standing Stones in three days' time.

"Can you beat him?" Yorik asked Edek as he stirred a simmering kettle of fish stew.

Edek lay back on one of the room's fur rugs. "I don't know. The priests of Ulonora are strong fighters."

"You fought him once before and beat him," Lucas pointed out.

"I was younger then, angry and foolish." Edek blushed. "And...I didn't mention this earlier, but...it was not an honorable fight. I crept into his house during the night. I stabbed him as he stood over his chamber pot."

Niccolo snorted laughter. "Stabbed to death while pissing. That's a horrible way to go."

Callia spoke up, her voice soft. "I have killed men while they pissed. I have killed them while they ate, while they humped their women, while they lay in a drunken stupor. I have even killed them while they prayed." She shrugged. "It's all the same. Edek, your notions of 'honor' serve no purpose. Your only regret should be that he survived. Never leave a wounded enemy behind you."

"Perhaps you are right, Callia, but I am not proud of my actions. I fought with what we

call *hen'ilon*. The red haze. When all you see is tinged with red, and all you want is to spill blood."

"Battle-lust," Niccolo said. "I know it well. The 'red haze,' eh? I like that."

Yorik passed around bowls of fish stew and cups of water as his guests settled on the floor, enjoying the warmth and safety of the cave. Tonight would be the only night during the whole trip when the group wouldn't need to set a watch.

Sandor said, "Don't be too hard on yourself, Edek. We've all done things we're not proud of, things that we'd like to bury in our past."

"Even you, Captain?" Lucas asked.

"Oh, certainly your 'Captain,' too," Yorik said, smiling.

"Indeed?" Niccolo asked. "I would hear this story. The Captain is very tight-lipped about his past."

"Did you two know each other?" Lucas asked Yorik.

Before Yorik could answer, Sandor cut in. "If the story is to be told, I will tell it myself. I won't have some decrepit old man who can't remember what he ate for breakfast tell my life story." Sandor took a long drink of water. "To answer your question, yes, Yorik and I knew each other. I served under him. I was his first officer on board the *D.M.S. Golden Sun*."

Niccolo's eyes widened in surprise. "A ship? You were a *ship's* captain? I always assumed you were a captain in the military."

"No, I was an officer in the Derelyn Merchant Fleet. Lucas, you probably don't know what that is. The Fleet is the largest in the world. Their ships are welcome in every port. Derelyn has a king, but it is the Fleet Admiralty that runs the country."

Lucas smiled, his eyes bright with visions of distant lands. "Sounds exciting! Why did you leave?"

"I took command of the *Golden Sun* when Yorik retired. I spent a few years following the trade winds, traveling the common routes. Then one day I received orders to make for Argis at all speed. When we got there, we found Argis at war with the Rolgoth Empire."

"Bastards," Yorik muttered.

To Lucas, Sandor explained, "The Empire once ruled most of the known world. In the past few centuries their borders have shrunk, but even so, they are still a ruthless, powerful nation. The Serpent and Dagger once flew over Argis, but they revolted a century ago, a fact that must give the Emperor fits. He sent a war fleet to Argis. When we arrived, the Argans had beaten back the Empire's initial thrust."

"The Empire underestimated Argis," Callia said.

"I believe you're right, Callia. The Empire suffered heavy casualties, but they managed to establish a foothold on the Argan coastline, about three miles from the capital city. Ten thousand soldiers strong, they built a crude fort and dug in. However, they couldn't move. They were hemmed in all sides by the Argans, and their invasion fleet had been sunk or captured, closing off any chance of retreat or reinforcements. Low on food and weapons, those ten thousand men were doomed.

"That's why Rolgoth contacted the Derelyn Admiralty. They were willing to pay very handsomely for any Merchant Fleet captain who could evade the Argan blockade and smuggle in food and weapons. I have some experience with smuggling, so I was sent, along with eight or nine other captains." Sandor's voice trailed off as he stared at the yellow flame in Yorik's oil lamp.

"What happened?" Lucas asked. "Did you make it past the blockade?"

"He never tried," Yorik said. "He refused a direct order from the Admiralty and resigned his commission in disgrace."

Sandor looked up, his face red with stubborn anger. "That's right." He glared at Yorik, who stared back with a weary resignation. "I refused to help the Empire with their bloody conquests. The penalty for refusing an order is death. Rather than return to Derelyn for my punishment, I fled. Yorik had told me about Last Ditch, and so I went there."

A long silence fell over the room. Finally, Lucas said, "You and Edek are both exiles."

"Me too," Niccolo said.

"Let me guess," Callia said. "A woman."

"No, actually it was money. I owe a large sum of coin to a group of rather unpleasant men."

Callia nodded. "I see. Well, you can count me in, too. I've been in exile for ten years. Last Ditch seems to attract those who have nowhere else to go."

Edek put his hand on Lucas's shoulder. "That just leaves you, boy, as the only one among us who isn't running from his past."

The men retired to the bunkroom, while Callia disappeared into Yorik's chambers. Sandor settled into his bunk. He was warm and comfortable for the first time in days, yet sleep still eluded him. Images swam before his eyes in the dark room—his ship, his crew, the tranquil blue of the waters off the Argan coast. After all these years, his past still haunted him.

Sandor woke the next morning tired and out of sorts. The group ate a quiet breakfast, then prepared to leave. The tunnel where they'd left their sleds continued on to the west, sloping gently upwards to the surface. The entrance was little more than a narrow slit in a rocky outcrop, guarded by twelve more stone totems.

As the others checked the tie-downs on the sleds, Sandor paused in the cave entrance. A soft footstep told him Yorik had come up to see them off. The two men stood side by side in silence for a long moment.

"What would you have done?" Sandor asked quietly, turning to look at Yorik.

Still gazing out at the frozen wastelands, Yorik said, "I would have obeyed the order, then regretted it for my entire life."

"Well, I *disobeyed* the order and I've still regretted it for my entire life!"

"You don't regret your decision. You regret what happened to *The Golden Sun* after you left. That is understandable, even though it wasn't your fault."

"The ship was sunk by the Argan navy, and all hands were lost! You think that wasn't my fault?"

"No, it wasn't. You didn't sink that ship. The crew had the same decision to make as you. When your first mate assumed command, he tried to make a name for himself and run the blockade. Your men knew the risks in following an inexperienced captain. You can't be responsible for the decisions of a hundred other men."

The knowledge that his former crew had died without him gnawed away at Sandor. The dull ache of his guilt and shame was always there, a permanent reminder of the price of command. "Perhaps I deserve this fate, pushing a sled back and forth across this forsaken wilderness."

"Are you saying this is your penance? Risking your life for the people of Last Ditch?"

Sandor stared down at his feet, unable to reply.

Yorik smiled. "You always had too much honor and integrity for the Merchant Fleet. Those

greedy old fools didn't deserve you. The people of Last Ditch, though, they respect you. They *need* you."

A fresh pang of guilt churned Sandor's stomach as he thought of his bag of gold coins. "They don't need me. There are others who can lead the caravans."

"Are there? Who? Would you follow Niccolo or Callia? They are good caravaners, good fighters when necessary. But they are not leaders. What was Callia's reaction when Edek's priest showed up?" When Sandor refused to meet Yorik's gaze, he continued, "You don't have to answer that. I can see it on your face. She wanted you to abandon him, right? But you didn't. In Argis, as now, you make the hard decisions. You follow your heart. *That* is what makes you the Captain."

* * *

Two days later, as the afternoon grew late, Sandor called for a halt in a sheltered vale between two hills. The Iron Tooth Mountains were much closer now. Sandor planned to rise early and reach the Standing Stones just after dawn.

"How will Brilik get here?" Lucas asked. "He couldn't cross the rope bridge like we did."

Edek nodded as he built his snow shelter. "My guess is he traveled downstream to find another place to cross. The nearest crossing is at least a day's journey out of the way."

"How will he get here by tomorrow morning then?"

"He will travel during the night. He will be there tomorrow. I am certain of that."

After the shelters were built, Edek started a fire with a quick magic spell and Niccolo cooked dinner over the oil lamp. After the meal, Sandor stood and yawned. "I'm off to bed. Lucas, you're on watch."

Sandor crawled into his shelter, wincing at the pain in his back and legs. When he lay back on his bed, something dug painfully into his side. He shifted around, reaching into his parka to remove the object. It turned out to be his bag of gold. The coins jingled as he moved it to a more comfortable position.

His plan had always been to leave Last Ditch as soon as he had enough money. He was going to buy passage on a ship. He had a notion to buy an inn, somewhere near the docks where he could watch the ships come and go. He missed the ocean. He missed the smell and feel of the waves beneath his feet. Besides, hadn't he earned a rest? Trekking back and forth to Stonespur was a task for the young. There were others who could lead the teams.

But if that were true, why did it feel as though he were trying to convince himself?

The rising sun found the caravan team already underway. The pre-dawn air was bitterly cold and the wind snatched at the travelers' clothes. Sandor trudged across the snowpack, pushing his sled ahead of him. His thoughts were on Edek. Over the years, the eccentric rukie had become a friend and a trusted companion. For his part, Edek had seemed as cheerful as usual this morning. He gave no outward sign that he was worried about his upcoming fight.

The sun crawled higher, doing little to warm the air. By the time it was fully up, Sandor and the others had reached a narrow gap between two hills. A mile off in the distance, atop another hill, was the place known as the Standing Stones. Ten narrow columns of black basalt thrust up from the hilltop like a crown.

Sandor reached the base of the hill. He pushed his sled into the shelter of a large boulder, then looked around. "No one here," he said to Edek.

"Brilik will be here."

Leaving their sleds behind, the five companions climbed the gently sloping sides of the hill. At the top, Sandor paused to study the closest of the stone columns. He had passed by this site on every trip to and from Stonespur, but had never stopped to investigate it. The columns were thick around as tree trunks, spaced in a rough circle about thirty yards in diameter. Carvings of animals, people, and other shapes wound around each of the stones. The edges of the carvings were worn smooth by the wind.

"What is this place?" Sandor asked Edek.

"It is called the Shrine of Broken Earth. It was once a holy place for Itumili, the god of the earth. He has very few worshippers anymore. Most of my people worship the Wind Goddess now." Edek ran a hand along the carved stone. "The Earth-god was once very powerful, though. Even now, I can still feel the magic in these stones."

"Edek, here they come!" Lucas said, pointing to the south. A group of figures could be seen walking towards the hill.

"When they arrive, you must stand outside the circle. Only Brilik and I may be inside the stones. You must keep quiet and not interfere, no matter what happens. The gods will determine my guilt. Captain, may I speak with you for a moment?"

Lucas, Callia, and Niccolo moved away to stand between two of the basalt columns. Edek took Sandor's elbow, leading him a few yards away. "Captain," he whispered. "You must take the others and leave now."

"What? Why?"

"If I fail, I am afraid Brilik may decide to kill you as well. He may feel it is his right."

"Well, he can try, but we might have something to say about it."

A smile pulled at Edek's lips, but it did not reach his eyes. He ran a hand across his tattooed head. "Captain, please..."

"We're not leaving you here. Do what you need to do, and we will bear witness."

Edek shook his head with weary resignation. "You are a stubborn man."

"Yes, I am. And Edek, here is something for you." Sandor pulled out his obdurium dagger and handed it to Edek, hilt first.

"Captain, I cannot take this!"

"I'm not giving it to you; I'm just loaning it to you. I think you'll find it useful."

Hesitantly, Edek grasped the dagger hilt. His eyes widened in surprise. "I have never held an obdurium weapon before," he whispered with awe. "It's as if the blade draws strength from the very earth itself!"

"Use it well. It will cut through just about anything."

"Thank you, Captain. And remember—if the fight does not go well, be ready to defend yourself. Brilik is a powerful priest, but here in this place, his power will be dulled. The Earth-god does not look kindly on followers of the Wind Goddess."

"Is that why you chose this place?"

Edek grinned and shrugged.

"You sly rukie." Sandor's smile faded. "Good luck, Edek."

Edek nodded. "I must prepare now."

Sandor stood with the others. Edek knelt in the center of the circle, his head bowed in prayer. The sound of boots crunching on snow told Sandor that Brilik and his men had arrived. They appeared on the far side of the circle. Sandor identified Brilik easily. The way the priest carried himself and the way the other men showed deference to him marked him as the leader.

Taller than Edek, Brilik's head was shaved in the usual rukie style, with swirling blue tattoos covering his scalp. His face was lined with age, but he still moved with the grace of a warrior.

"Edek of White Claw," Brilik yelled, his voice taunting. "I did not think you would show. Perhaps the years have finally taught you courage."

Edek looked up from his prayers. "Brilik of Sharp Spear, the years have taught me many things."

"Is that so?" Brilik stepped into the circle of stones. Immediately the mocking grin on his face disappeared. Frowning, he looked around at the stones, studying the carvings. "Very clever," he said. "A shrine to the Earth-god. He will not prevail, not even in his own place of power. The Wind Goddess demands vengeance!"

Edek bowed his head. "I will accept her judgment. She will determine my guilt."

Brilik nodded towards Sandor and the others. "Your companions understand the ritual? They will not interfere?"

"They will not."

"Good. Then rise, Edek of White Claw. You have had fifteen years to speak your prayers. Your time of judgment is at hand. I have waited a long time for this. I still carry the scar on my stomach. Every morning the scar aches, a constant reminder of your cowardice and blasphemy. Only when you are dead will I be at peace."

Edek rose smoothly to his feet. In his right hand he carried his sword with the long hilt. In his left was Sandor's obdurium dagger. He stood unmoving as Brilik paced around him in a wide circle. "I will not ask for your forgiveness, Brilik. What I did was shameful, but I was in love with Eria."

"Silence! My daughter's name must not be spoken!" Brilik's face was red with rage. "You shamed her and yourself and your family." A sly grin crossed his face. "After you fled, your family was punished in your stead."

"What did you do to them?"

The mocking tone was back in Brilik's voice. "I beheaded your father in the village square. I sold your two sisters to a slave trader. I might have spared your mother, but she took her own life, rather than live in shame."

Niccolo leaned close to Sandor. "If Edek doesn't kill this idiot soon," he whispered, "I may do it myself." Sandor nodded his agreement.

Edek was trying to keep his anger in check, but Sandor could see the tears coursing down his friend's cheeks.

Brilik stopped his pacing and drew a long, two-handed sword from a scabbard on his back. "I have chased you for fifteen years. I have tracked you across seas and mountains and the frozen wilderness. I have followed you to this place, and here you will die—an outcast and a blasphemer, mourned by no clan. On your guard, Edek of White Claw. The Wind Goddess will tear your soul to shreds."

Edek dropped into a fighting crouch. "So be it. My only regret is that I didn't kill you the first time."

With a furious cry, Brilik charged at Edek. The two men met in the center, both fueled by rage and murderous hate. Brilik swung a vicious two-handed chop that would have decapitated Edek, had he not ducked beneath the blow. Edek parried Brilik's return thrust, then jabbed swiftly with the obdurium dagger. Brilik danced backward just out of reach. The blade tip caught the front of the priest's parka, slicing open a foot-long gash.

Brilik's eyes narrowed when he recognized the obdurium weapon. If he felt any fear, it didn't show on his face. "When your mother killed herself," he went on, "her last words were a curse on you, her only son, for destroying her family."

"He's trying to goad Edek into making a mistake," Callia noted.

Sandor nodded. "It might work too. I've never seen Edek so angry."

"Do you notice anything odd about the priest's sword?"

As Brilik and Edek fought, Sandor studied Brilik's sword. The air around the blade shimmered, giving the sword a distorted, watery appearance, as though looking at it through a piece of thick glass. "What is that?" Sandor asked.

"Magic," Callia said. "I've seen similar spells before."

"What does it do?"

Callia shrugged. "It might make the sword stronger or faster or sharper. It could be anything."

The two combatants moved in, slashing furiously at each other. Brilik attacked relentlessly on Edek's left side, forcing Edek to use the obdurium dagger to defend himself. Sandor expected the dagger to slice through the priest's sword, but instead, each time Brilik's enchanted sword met the dagger, a strange, discordant tone pealed out across the hilltop. The noise set Sandor's teeth on edge.

Soon, the snow was a trampled mess of footprints as the rukies' battle ranged across the entire circle. Neither man was able to gain a clear advantage.

The two men paused for a moment, each panting heavily. Brilik continued his relentless pacing, moving in a circle around Edek. "Your sisters cursed your name as well," he said. "They were to be sold to a Bledish harem, forced to meet the whims of a barbarian warlord."

Edek seemed to fly across the intervening space, his two weapons moving almost too fast to see. Brilik met the onslaught, his own sword moving effortlessly to meet each attack.

"They were pretty young things, too," Brilik went on. "Or at least they were at the time. By now they would be too old. Their master probably grew tired of them and had them killed. What were their names?"

If anything, Edek's attack grew more intense.

"*Hen'ilon*," Lucas muttered.

"What's that?" Sandor asked, not taking his eyes away from the battle.

"*Hen'ilon*. Edek called it the 'red haze.' When he loses himself in a fight."

Indeed, Edek's face was barely recognizable. His eyes blazed, and his lips were pulled back in a snarl.

And still Brilik taunted him. "When I executed your father," the priest said, dodging Edek's blows, "he sobbed like a mewling baby. I see where you get your cowardice from."

Edek stepped in close, leading with his sword. Brilik caught the thrust on his own sword, the two blades sliding together down to the hilt. Tears were pouring down Edek's face, which was only inches away from Brilik's. Edek suddenly lunged forward, smashing his forehead into Brilik's nose. Blood covered both men in a fine mist. Brilik stumbled back, his eyes glazed.

"Now!" Sandor hissed.

Edek saw his opening. With an inarticulate cry of rage, he slammed his obdurium dagger into Brilik's chest, pouring all of his frustration and anger into that one blow. The dagger rammed through Brilik's body like wet paper. The entire length of the blade burst out of the priest's back and Edek's left arm was buried up to his elbow inside Brilik's chest cavity. His face

a horrid mask of pure hated, Edek twisted his arm, drawing an agonized shriek from Brilik.

The priest fell backward, almost dragging Edek down on top of him. Edek pulled free, his arm drenched with gore and the dagger black with blood. The sword dropped from Brilik's hand. He slumped to the ground, his lifeless eyes never leaving Edek's face.

Edek dropped to his knees, tipped his head back to the windswept sky, and screamed. The sound was heartbreaking in its sadness and pain.

* * *

Four days later, the companions set up camp in a rocky crag deep in the Iron Tooth Mountains, near the top of Whitewind Pass. From there, if the weather held, it was only two more days to Stonespur.

Conversation amongst the travelers had been sparse since the fight. Edek was quiet and withdrawn. The others kept their distance, not wanting to intrude. Even Niccolo was quiet, respecting Edek's pain.

They all went about their business, pushing the sleds, building the snow shelters, eating, and sleeping. The routine was numbing in its repetition. Only the stunning view as they climbed higher into the mountains offered a change from the monotony. The icy wilderness swept out beneath them, stretching from horizon to horizon. Sandor could almost believe that the entire world had frozen over.

After Edek defeated Brilik, the other rukies had turned and left without a word. They just left Brilik's body up on the hilltop. Sandor had almost had to drag Edek away from the gruesome scene. Even as he kept hoping that Edek would shake off his despondency, he knew the man was mourning for his family.

Dinner that night was a sullen, miserable affair. Sandor and the others dutifully ate their strips of raw seal meat. The day's journey had been a difficult one, pushing the sleds up the sloping mountain pass. Thankfully, by this point in the trip, the sleds were noticeably lighter, with only a few days' worth of food remaining.

Sandor woke early for his shift, relieving Callia who nodded her thanks and crawled into her shelter. Wrapping himself in his blanket, Sandor sat on a large boulder. The sky was cloudless, the stars cold and clear. Periodically Sandor rose and walked around the campsite, stamping his feet to get his blood moving. He was anxious to get to Stonespur and sink into a scalding hot bath. He sometimes wondered if he would ever truly feel warm again. The cold on this trip had bothered him more than usual. The chill sank its teeth into his flesh and refused to let go.

A soft rustle behind him made him reach for his dagger.

"Captain," came Edek's soft voice. In the dim light of the stars, Sandor saw the rukie sit down on a rock nearby.

"Edek. Your shift doesn't start for another hour."

"I know. I couldn't sleep."

"How are you feeling?"

Edek sighed. "I keep hoping that what Brilik told me about my family was just lies to make me angry. I suppose I'll never know for certain."

"Why not go back home and find out?"

"That would be a very long trip. Over land, it would take a year. Even by ship, it would be

several months. I have no money for such a voyage." He paused. "Captain...why didn't you leave me behind? I know that's what Callia and Niccolo would have done, and I wouldn't have blamed them for it. The caravan has to get through."

"I already have enough regret in my life. I don't need any more."

"Regret is a difficult thing to live with."

"Yes, it is." Sandor thought of his former crew, and wondered if Yorik was right, that their deaths weren't his fault. He wondered if the guilt would always be there. He shifted his position on the rock, grunting in annoyance when the bag of coins jabbed into his hip.

A thought suddenly occurred to him. "Edek, what if there were a way for you to go home? Would you go?"

"Of course."

Before he could reconsider, Sandor reached inside his parka and pulled out the bag of coins. "Here, I want you to have this. There should be enough money to buy passage on a ship to wherever you need to go." He handed Edek the bag.

In the darkness, Sandor couldn't see Edek's face, but the confusion was clear in the other man's voice. "Why...why are you giving me this? Where did it come from?"

"I've been saving it for a long time. I was planning to leave Last Ditch, but I...changed my mind. The townspeople need me to lead the caravans, and I won't abandon them. I have friends there." He thought of Allie and Lucas. "Even a family of sorts."

"It's too much. I can't accept such a gift!"

Sandor laughed ruefully. "I told Orden the same thing when he gave me this dagger. Perhaps this is my atonement. The decisions I made can't be undone, but you have a chance to go back home and find out about your family, and maybe find Eria. The uncertainty will haunt you forever if you don't go."

"But, Captain—"

"Enough." Sandor rose to his feet. "Go with my blessing, Edek. You've been a valuable companion and a good friend. Go make your peace."

A long silence followed while Sandor waited for Edek to make up his mind. He heard the rukie stand up, and suddenly Sandor was enveloped in a crushing embrace. "Thank you," Edek whispered.

Sandor patted his friend on the back. "You're welcome."

"Go to sleep, Captain. I'll take the watch."

Sandor didn't argue. He crawled into his snow shelter. For the first time in days, he immediately dropped off to sleep.

By noon the next day, the caravan crested Whitewind Pass. Sandor's entire body ached from the climb to the top of the pass. Soft snow clogged the gap between the mountains, making the ascent even more difficult. Sandor leaned over with his hands on his knees, gasping for air. He heard the others pull up alongside him.

"There's civilization, boy," Niccolo said, "or what passes for it in this part of the world."

Sandor stood up straight. The view from the top of the pass was breathtaking. The trail wound gently down to the west, winding in and out of the snow-covered pine trees. In the distance was the dazzling blue expanse of the Drellus Ocean. Along the coastline, a peninsula jutted into the ocean, forming a sheltered harbor on its southern side. Wooden buildings with thatched roofs followed the curving arc of the harbor and out onto the peninsula, clinging to the rocky slopes. Tendrils of smoke from a hundred cook fires drifted up, only to be snatched away

by the ever-present wind. All manner of ships bobbed in the harbor, from small fishing vessels to large seafaring rimskippers.

"That's Stonespur?" Lucas breathed. "It's so big."

"At least ten times bigger than Last Ditch," Niccolo said. "Maybe more. It's a miserable, dirty town. The people are rude and most of them would just as soon rob you as look at you. But," Niccolo grinned and slapped Lucas on the back, "the vaj-houses are plentiful, and the ale is a far sight better than your mother's homebrew. C'mon, boy, it's time we made a man out of you."

Callia snorted derisively. "With *you* as his teacher?"

"Milady, not even you can dampen my spirits this day. By this time tomorrow I'll be sitting in a hot tub with an ale in one hand and a wench in the other. Let's get moving, Captain."

"You have the lead, Lucas," Sandor said.

Lucas's eyes widened, followed by a broad grin. "Yes, Captain! All right, standard ten-pace spacing. Let's be careful on the downslope." Snow crunched beneath the sled runners as Lucas led the caravan down out of the mountains. Niccolo followed, then Callia and Edek. The rukie met his gaze as he passed, giving Sandor a wink.

Sandor paused, taking a moment to look behind him. Back through Whitewind Pass, the sun reflected off the hard snowpack, making Sandor's eyes water. The wind tugged at his parka, almost knocking back his hood.

He found himself already anxious to head back home.

The End

Jason Gross lives in Chicago where he works as a Technical Writer. He has two children and is married to the most beautiful, supportive woman in the world. "Last Ditch" was inspired by Michael Moorcock's "The Ice Schooner," and also by an interest in exploring some common themes between the Fantasy and Western genres.

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The wind was a discomfort she was used to.

"You would be Sayne and Merillian," the Servillian dragon-rider called across the sky between them with a smile. He held his pike upward, unthreatening.

After a moment's hesitation Sayne nodded and noticed Merillian exchange a similar look with the dragon. Even so, he tensed beneath her and the spines near the base of his neck darkened. The other dragon must be male.

Sayne took her hand from the hilt of her sword and touched one of his spines. It lightened just a little.

"I am Ferst, dragon-rider of Serville, and this is Ock. We heard you were fighting for the Verns and have been sent to find you. I have a proposition for you, mercenary. If you are willing to hear it."

Sayne gestured for him to continue, unable to trust the words that waited on her tongue. But then again, she could have imagined the contempt in the word 'mercenary.'

Ferst grinned. "I am here to ask for your help. Serville is a not a large country, as you may know, and I am its only dragon-rider. We are hardly a match for an army the size of which Vern has raised…"

"Watch what you say to an enemy, Ferst," Sayne called.

Merillian snorted and, in his distraction, clipped Ock's wing with his own. Both dragons struggled for a second in the air, dropping and thrashing their wings to stay airborne. Sayne closed her eyes and gripped Merillian's scales with her hands.

They did not circle as closely after both dragons had recovered.

Ferst was pale as he resumed the conversation, shouting to accommodate the extra distance. "It would surprise me if you turned this down. My lord king will offer whatever it takes to bring you to our side."

Sayne shook her head. "And the Verns could triple it easily."

"My king is willing to offer you something far more valuable than money. Should you fight for us, should we be victorious, you will be welcome at his court."

"Why would a dragon-rider want to live at court?"

"I apologize, Sayne. I have not made myself clear. My lord will welcome you *as part of his family*. You will have a title; you will have land and security for you and Merillian. My kingdom will never stop thanking you, you will never be hungry or cold or desperate again. You will have a *home*."

Sayne's breath caught in her throat and she could not answer.

Ferst smiled. "I know of your reputation. I know you wander from battle to battle. You have no home, do you? Or family. Wouldn't you like a family, Sayne?"

A low rumble began to resonate from Merillian's chest, and its vibrations against her legs caught her attention.

"This is not a decision I can make on my own." Wind blew hair into Sayne's mouth. Gradually, Merillian's growling eased.

Ferst's smile dropped away and his shoulders slumped. "Please, discuss it! But please, we don't have much time..."

"We know that. We will return before the first light of dawn. If you want your answer, be here to meet us."

Ferst frowned and opened his mouth, but seemed to reconsider his protest. He nodded and bowed awkwardly from the waist. "We shall speak on the morrow then. Remember, we can offer

you a home. No mercenary has ever been offered more."

Sayne pursed her lips but nodded, and Ferst raised his pike in a final salute. Ock turned in a loose circle and flew back toward the south.

A flare was crawling its way into the sky when Merillian finally headed north. The magicians were summoning them. An audience with Jorek was the last thing Sayne wanted.

"Are you all right?" Merillian was always quick to see when she was troubled

"We need to discuss this."

He was silent for a moment. "Do we?"

"Of course. He's right, you know. No mercenary has ever been offered a home…no, more than that! A place on a royal family!" She laughed. "Imagine me, with a title and jewels and everything."

Again, a silence. "Then we *do* need to discuss this." The spines on his back were dark again.

Before Sayne could speak, Merillian flattened his wings and plummeted into Vern. This time, she was forced to lie on her stomach and wrap her arms around his neck to hold on.

* * *

Sayne was eight years old when she became a dragon-rider. It was the day Paf was killed.

She found them behind the stables. Paf cowered against the wooden wall, but still meowed when she rounded the corner. His dark eyes looked up, so trusting, and she screamed.

Jay stood above the kitten, another rock in his hand. He jumped when she screamed and glared at her, holding the rock higher.

"Shut it, brat! It's just some useless cat…"

Sayne ran and stood before the kitten. He struggled to stand, but one of his legs bent at a strange angle and couldn't support him.

"Get out of the way, brat." Her older brother grasped her shoulder but she shook him off.

Slowly, Sayne bent down and touched the blood on Paf's fur. There were more rocks on the ground around him, large ones.

"What did you do?" She grabbed a rock from the ground and threw it at her brother.

Paf was a stray nobody wanted. She had hidden him in the stables, fed him stolen milk, and played with him every day. He was the only friend of a girl too unusual, too quiet and intense to make friends her own age or species.

As she lifted another rock, a large hand wrapped around her wrist.

"What *is* this?" Her father held her hand almost hard enough to hurt.

"Jay hurt Paf!" Sayne was too upset to be wary of the scorn in her father's eyes.

"It's just a cat, Da. Not useful. Why keep it?" Jay was old enough to help run the farm, and their father respected that. He did not respect girls who did not know their place and would not even help around the house.

Seriff maintained his rough hold on Sayne's wrist, and glanced at the cat. "Fool of a boy!" Seriff released his daughter to cuff Jay on the back of the head. "The cat might be useless, but that's no reason to be cruel to the creature."

"Yes, Da." Jay knew not to cry out, not to sulk. Yet, as Seriff turned away he touched his head gingerly.

Seriff looked the kitten over and shook his head. "These things should be clean and quick.

Do not cause them any unnecessary pain." He drew a knife from his belt. Sayne didn't even notice until he held it to Paf's throat. "Like this."

A quick, sharp cut, and Paf died so easily.

For a second, Sayne could only stare at the body of her little friend.

"No!" Sayne still held a rock in one hand and ran at her father with it held high. He was crouched before the kitten and looked up at her in surprise. Tears blurred her eyes, and she almost missed, but Sayne brought the rock down onto her father's forehead.

Seriff roared and fell backward. Jay cried out and leapt to his father's aid. Sayne ran.

Sayne was fast. She knew the secret ways to escape her house and village and hide in the tree-covered mountains. So she fled deep into the forest.

Sayne ran until the forest's roots reached up and gripped her ankle, sending her sprawling. A rock scraped her arm and it began to bleed. She had seen Ma soothe the hurts her brother inevitably gained and knew she should wash it at least. So she went in search of water and found something else instead.

In a hollow between trees, where the ground was clear of plants and knotted roots, lay the red body of a small dragon. The creature was no bigger than a cat and kept so still Sayne thought it was dead. It reminded her of Paf.

Her bleeding arm forgotten, she stepped closer. There was a rope wrapped around one of its hind legs, trapping it. Sayne remembered the men who travelled to the forest in search of fox pelt and rabbit flesh, and recognized one of their snares. They would probably take the dragon's shiny skin, like they did the rusty fur of the foxes. She hated it when they returned, skin and fur hanging from their saddles, vacant eye-sockets staring at the ground. It wasn't right to do that to such a beautiful little dragon, so she bent to try and undo the snare.

The rope was so tight it had cut into the dragon's skin, and blood coated the knot. Sayne pulled at it, but she could not grip it, and with each movement more blood spilled from the creature's leg. The other end of the rope was tied to a stake driven into the earth. Sayne pulled at it, but it did not move. Her hands slipped and she fell, landing heavily.

She thought of Paf, lying dead against the stable wall. She hadn't been able to help him either. Her head dropped into her hands and she began to cry.

"Why do you cry?" The voice was so soft Sayne thought she had imagined it. But when she looked up, she saw the dragon watching her.

"Because I can't get you out and they will come and take your skin. Maybe a rich lady will buy you in the city market. That's what they do to the foxes, and it makes the trappers rich. It is not an honourable living." Sayne spoke with the authority of a child who had overheard her parents talking.

"You will not be able to free me." The dragon didn't sound sad. "I have tried gnawing on the rope, but it tightens. And then there is more pain. So much pain I can not think. How long will it take them to come?"

"I don't know."

"It matters little. I have been here too long, without food, without water, without light and sky. I will be dead before they get here. I will not need my skin after that."

"But it's not fair! I *will* get you out!" She reached for the knot again.

"No!" the dragon cried, and jerked on the ground. "Each time you touch it, the rope tightens. I do not want any more pain!"

Her tears returned, but Sayne shook her head. She would not let the dragon down, not like

she had let Paf down. "I don't care; I want you to be alive!"

The dragon thrashed, making it impossible for Sayne to grasp the rope. The creature was strong for something so small, and Sayne received several kicks for her efforts. The movement renewed the bleeding in her arm, but she managed to grab the dragon's damaged leg. As the blood from her arm splattered onto the slick snare, the dragon stilled. He was breathing harshly, his heart beating so strongly Sayne could see its movement on his chest.

"You have given of your own blood." The dragon's voice was quiet but deep.

Sayne looked at her arm and the blood she had dripped into his wound.

"I…I have?"

The dragon pinned her with a bright yellow eye. "Press your wound to mine, little human, and receive my blood in turn."

Sayne swallowed the bile that rose in her throat at the prospect, but did as the dragon told her. It was impossible to deny the compulsion within his gaze. She had been foolish. A dragon could arrest you with its eyes, she knew that much.

As she touched her injury to the dragon's bleeding leg, a bolt of fire shot up her arm. Sayne cried out with shock and pain and pulled back, holding her arm against her chest. The pain faded, to be replaced with tingling energy. Sayne looked down at the dragon and met his yellow eyes. This time she was able to look away, as though his magic no longer held her in sway.

The dragon sighed. "Tell me your name."

Sayne kept her mouth shut. With her name in its possession, the dragon could own her entirely.

He chuckled. "You are right to be afraid, but it is too late. We are already bonded, by blood no less. I already possess you, as you do me. I will tell you mine, and then we will be even. My name is Merillian, little human, and I am yours."

Sayne found she did not want to hold her tongue. "My name is Sayne, and I am yours."

Merillian nodded, his yellow eyes grave. "And so it is done. Free me, and we shall never part. We will grow together, you will learn to ride my back, and I will protect you from harm. Together, even unto death."

* * *

The Vern magicians had created a makeshift stable for Merillian in a square close to the castle. It was roped off and filled with a large, specially constructed tent. As Sayne left for the castle, Merillian was settling into a sunlit corner for a nap.

Sayne headed straight for Jorek's audience chamber as soon as she was admitted to the castle. Two armoured guards hurried her into the room and followed. They closed the doors and stood at the entrance, expressionless statues of steel. Sayne looked over at the man standing by a large stained-glass window.

"Dragon-rider Sayne." Jorek's voice was dry and uncomfortable to listen to. The senior magician of the Vern court was dressed in yellow velvet lined with snow-white fur. The silver pendant around his neck, a many-pointed star engraved with runes, was the only indication of his office. He did not look away from the coloured glass.

"Lord Jorek." Sayne did not try to pretend enthusiasm.

"I told you to return as soon as victory was certain. You are late, *again*. We were forced to send a flare, *again*." The magician finally turned on her. There were uneven spots of colour on

his pallid cheeks, and he gripped an empty crystal goblet so tightly Sayne was surprised it hadn't shattered.

She shrugged. "It happens. Merillian needed caring for…"

"Stop giving me excuses, woman!" Jorek scowled and slammed the goblet down on a desk beside him. "I am paying you to *obey* me. You cannot choose which orders to follow."

Sayne forced herself to relax; it was important to appear in control. "I am *not* some unskilled foot soldier you bought from the slave blocks. I am a dragon-rider, and you know how lucky you are to find one willing to work for money. Unless you show me some respect I will terminate this contract."

The magician grinned and smoothed his greying hair with a shaking hand. "I would like to see you try."

Sayne heard the guards behind her step forward and repressed a building sigh. If she took up Ferst's offer, she would never have to endure this kind of disrespect again.

She shook her head, as though trying to dislodge her thoughts. It was not the time for day dreaming. "You're being foolish. Do you really want a rampaging dragon in your city?"

Jorek snorted. "The beast will be easy to deal with once you are removed. So far your presence has been nothing but a waste of coin. The war is almost over, and we do not need you."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

Sayne placed two fingers on the small scar on her right forearm. Instantly, it began to throb. The blood bond between them was eternal.

"*Merillian, my love,*" she called to him through the bond and felt the dragon stir.

"*Sayne.*"

"*Kindly do me a favour.*"

"*Anything, you know that.*"

"*Make a lot of noise. Roar until the city hears you; shake the very foundations of the damned place.*"

A great sound came by way of a reply. Merillian roared, and the castle trembled. Jorek turned white, and his guards stilled.

"My dragon knows, gentlemen, any time you think to put me in danger. Take another step and your entire city will go up in flames."

For a second, Jorek appeared indecisive, but with a resigned wave he called his men off.

Sayne smiled. "My thanks. And now I have some news for you. I was late, magician, for a reason. It seems Serville has a dragon-rider too, and will no doubt use him to counter your final push into their territory. You have the advantage now, but how will your armies fare against a dragon-rider? Of course, it would be convenient if you had one of your own…" She left the sentence hanging, watching Jorek's astounded face.

"Why should we believe you?" he finally rasped.

"Can you afford not to? I would be more than happy to leave, but what would you do if I am proven right?"

Jorek rubbed his face with one rough hand. "How much would it take to keep you in our employ?"

"After such an insult?" Sayne grinned and sat in one of the cushioned seats that decorated the room. "Let's discuss that, shall we?"

Sayne left the castle several hours later, her sword back at her hip and a bulging purse of gold in her hands. Feeling confident, enjoying the evening sun and the feeling of money in her

hand, she strode into the city.

The further she walked, the more crowded the streets became. Every person she passed stopped and stared. Women, dressed in long skirts of rich fabric, hid behind fans or buried their faces in their men's shoulders. Men would step back, some even making signs with their hands designed to ward off evil. It was even more attention than usual; Merillian must have rattled them.

Her fur-lined leather pants and tight woollen shirt made her self conscious, not to mention uncomfortable. She was already beginning to sweat in them, and the pants were chaffing her upper thighs. Years of riding Merillian's wide back had given her a bow-legged, ungraceful stride. She felt the eyes on her but heard no laughter. This time they seemed too frightened to laugh, but she could not decide which reaction she preferred.

Her smile faltered. Determined not to let the people of Vern dissuade her from food and wine, she hurried into a seedy looking tavern. The building was small and dark, with a low ceiling and dirty rushes on the floor. She moved to a concealed table nonetheless. In the half-light, she surveyed the room and realized she was being watched in turn. A large man with craggy hands wrapped around a tankard grinned at her, baring dirty, broken teeth. A small group of young men, dressed too finely to be spending their wealth in such a rundown place, shared their table and laps with a gaggle of whores.

A serving girl hurried toward Sayne's table. She babbled, tried to curtsy and almost fell over her own feet. "My…my lady…"

Sayne tossed a gold piece onto the stained wood. "Can you bring me some food and wine?"

"Of…of course, but…" The girl glanced over her shoulder, and Sayne looked up to see a large man in a filthy apron staring at her. His face was pale and slick, his piggish eyes almost hidden beneath heavily furred brows.

"I won't cause any trouble."

"Of course not…" Again the girl glanced at the man Sayne assumed to be the owner and he seemed to grow paler. "Are you sure…wouldn't you want to go…to…"

"Somewhere cleaner?" Sayne could not keep the words in check.

The girl nodded, her hands shaking.

"No. I'm sure. Please, just take the money and bring me back some food."

"We…um…I'm sorry but we don't serve wine. Only the lords can afford it and they don't come down here. Until you, of course!" The serving girl laughed a strained, high-pitched squawk.

"Oh. Water then?"

"Ah…there's no water that won't make you sick."

Sayne frowned as she felt her face flush.

"What do you have then?" She couldn't stop her voice rising, and the girl flinched.

"Ale…ma'am. There's ale, but it's not good enough for…"

"No, it'll do. Just bring me some food and drink. Whatever you have."

The serving girl fled.

Sayne sat in her dark corner and stared at the table. The petty gentry and their whores had stopped laughing. She glanced up and saw fearful eyes on her. Some of the more inebriated men were leering at her, even gesturing.

The serving girl returned with a bowl of watery stew and a tankard of sediment-laden ale. Sayne ate and drank quickly, regretting ever stepping into the city. She hated the fear in their eyes. And the contempt beneath it.

As soon as the food was gone, she stood and almost ran from the establishment. Ignoring the looks and the gasps, she hurried through the city and back to the stable. Over and over she told herself she didn't need them, she had Merillian. But the familiar feeling of rejection tightened her chest. She shook her head to dismiss forming tears.

Merillian lay in fresh straw, his head resting on elegantly crossed forepaws. The magicians had fed him, it seemed, as there was a large pile of clean bones stacked into one corner. Dragons, Sayne had come to realise, were very neat.

One large yellow eye opened as she grew near.

"Sayne." His voice was soft. "What ails you?"

She sat, and leaned against the dragon's great shoulder. "The usual."

"What need have you for your own kind, when I am here?"

Sayne nestled into Merillian's soft scales. "I know. But there are times when I…miss their company."

"Foolishness," Merillian snorted. "Humans are unseemly creatures, cramming themselves within too-small walls. Dragons are far more dignified. Never will you see us together, except to mate, and then only for a day."

Sayne laughed. Perhaps that *was* the more dignified way of doing things. But it was a lonely life for a human to lead. "It doesn't matter, my love. We are together, so I am content."

"There is something we must discuss before I let you sleep."

"I know."

She let the silence settle in, despite her words.

"They haven't changed, have they?"

Merillian's question caught her off guard. "What…who?"

"People. Your people. They are the same now as they were when we met, aren't they?"

Suddenly chilled, Sayne wrapped her coat tighter around her shoulders. "Yes, they are. They are ignorant and cruel and arrogant. But I..."

"Still want to belong."

"I know you don't understand that. Dragons are solitary, like you said. You've never felt a *need* to belong somewhere you don't."

"Ferst's offer would give you a place to belong."

She nodded. "They *want* me to be one of them."

"I told you once before I would not be caged within human walls."

"Yes. And I still wanted to go with you."

"Well, my love?"

Twisting, Sayne turned to meet Merillian's gaze. It was rare for him to speak so openly.

His eyes were golden and deeply sad. "Do you regret that now?"

* * *

Sayne stared at the little dragon, wide-eyed. "Together," she whispered. "I would like that. Will you be my friend…always? Will you never leave me, no matter what?"

She thought Merillian seemed to be smiling. "Far more than that, little human. Far closer than friends. But you must still free me."

Sayne leant forward to look at the knot again.

"I can't untie it." She met the yellow eye without fear.

"I was a fool, and did not notice it." He glanced back at his bloody leg. "It scared me when it gripped me. Then it flicked me off my feet, and I hit my head when I fell. I wanted to get away, so I fought it, and it tightened."

Tears returned to Sayne's eyes. She couldn't lose another friend.

"I don't have a knife," she whispered. "If I go back Da will be angry with me and they will not let me leave. I don't know how long it will take for me to come back." She shuffled over and crouched close to the dragon's head. "I'm so sorry," she sniffed, "I don't know how to help you."

"Do not worry overmuch." Merillian let his head fall back onto the ground and sighed hot air that tickled Sayne's bare legs.

With a small cry, she sat up. "I know!" She began scratching around on the forest floor.

Merillian raised his head, a frown evident on his serpentine brow. "Sayne, child, what are you…"

Grinning, Sayne held up a small twig. It was short, smooth, and rather thick. She felt extremely proud of herself. "I know how to help you!"

"With a stick?" Merillian did not sound excited.

"Of course! I can't undo the rope, or cut it, but we can burn it! I'm sure it'll work. I know you can breathe fire, you're a dragon. Breathe on this, and I'll use it to burn the rope apart!"

Merillian looked sceptical. It was strange how easy it was for Sayne to interpret the looks in his eyes. "You could set my leg on fire as well."

Sayne's shoulders slumped. "I don't know what else to do."

"And it's better than lying here to die, I guess. All right, my dear girl, hold out your stick!"

Sayne did as she was told, and Merillian sent a bolt of flame over the end of the twig.

Concentrating to control her shaking hand, Sayne held the flame beneath the rope. There was only a small length she could burn, a few inches straining between the peg that held it to the ground and Merillian's tense leg. The flame flickered. Sweat dripped into her eyes. But gradually, the flame caught. The blood that coated the rope sizzled and stank, but at last it began to burn. It took only a moment for the flame to chew its way through.

"Pull away!" Sayne cried, and withdrew the flame. Merillian jerked his leg and broke the few remaining threads of rope. Sayne covered the small flames with dirt.

Merillian was free.

The dragon stood on shaking paws. He held his damaged leg off the ground, but managed to limp over to Sayne. She smiled at him and he nodded his approval.

"That was well done," he said, and her cheeks flushed with pride. The dragon peered at his leg. "It will need attention, though. The rope must be removed, and the wound treated."

Sayne nodded. "My home is close…But I can't go back there! Not after…"

"But it seems the best idea."

"If I go back they will punish me, and will not let me leave!"

Merillian laughed. "I am a young dragon, as you are but a child. Even so, I carry the wisdom and the power of my race. The will of a dragon can not be denied."

Sayne looked at him, wide-eyed.

"Your humans will obey me, do not fear. They will heal me as I command them to, and we will both leave. I am a free dragon and will not be confined within human walls."

"Will you let me carry you?" Her voice shook. She was both thrilled and frightened by the dragon's talk of freedom.

Merillian stretched out crimson wings and frowned as they quivered. "It seems I have

little choice."

Sayne stood and scooped the small dragon into her arms. He was heavier than he looked, and so warm she was immediately sweating, but she did not complain. Merillian was her new friend and while she could help him, she would.

"Will I really be able to ride you one day?" Sayne asked as she set off through the forest.

Merillian rested his head against her shoulder. "Indeed you shall. And I will never let you fall."

* * *

They waited in the air for sunrise. A silver sliver of a moon still smiled in the west, but most of the stars had faded. Sayne breathed steam she could not see into the sky and hugged Merillian's back. The air was at its coldest before the sun rose, and it was times like these when his heat was all that kept her alive.

"It is almost sunrise," Merillian spoke to reassure her. The dragon could sense her discomfort.

"Perhaps he isn't coming." Sayne pressed her cheek to Merillian's scales, and let his clenching muscles warm some feeling into her face.

"They come. I see them."

Merillian banked around and flew to meet the blue dragon and his rider. As Sayne sat up, a fresh burst of wind forced its way into her collar. She shuddered; it was icy.

"Well met, Sayne!" Ferst was grinning.

She scowled. He had obviously not been waiting in the freezing wind for what felt like hours.

Either Ferst did not see her expression, or he chose to ignore it. "We commence our counter-attack at dawn. With you by my side we will mow their soldiers down like grass before a summer fire!"

Sayne urged Merillian to fly as close to the other dragon as he could. "We have not agreed to join you yet, Ferst."

The grin on his face faltered. "You…no, you have not." He breathed deeply. "Tell me then, what is your decision?"

"We believe you have misjudged us."

"What…?"

"Do *not* interrupt me!" Sayne shouted, and Ferst was instantly silent. "We care nothing for this little war. We will never be bound, not by honour, not by duty, and certainly not by pity. Your people face impossible odds, but we will not lend our strength to their cause."

"But…think of what my king has offered! Remember what you are giving up!"

"I am not one of you and I do not need to be."

A cloud passed beneath them, momentarily obscuring the lights from the armies below.

"Fighting is what Merillian and I do to earn enough for food and shelter when we need it. We will not fight, will not risk our *lives*, for anyone other than each other. You might think it a lonely, dishonourable life, but I do not care." After all, with Merillian beneath her, she would never be alone.

The first rays of sunlight streaked over the horizon, lighting Ferst's pale face. Far below, Vern horns announced another attack.

Sayne touched Merillian on the back in a prearranged signal. The motion of his flying changed as he dipped. “We are here to backup the Vern advance. You should be prepared to fight if you want to try and stop us.”

Ferst lowered the tip of his spear, and shook his head. “You know I must.”

“That’s your choice. I’ve already made mine.”

The End

Joanne Anderton lives in Sydney, Australia, with her patient husband and not so patient cats. She loves speculative fiction and has been making up unusual stories for as long as she can remember. When she is forced to step out of her head and interact with the ‘real’ world, she works in the distribution and marketing side of a small Australian press. Her writing has appeared in Shadowed Realms.

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"You may," said the Elders, in a chorus of eleven voices.

* * *

"You know I have no wish to go," Daresh pleaded. They were in the corridors of the palace under the waters; around them, liquid fires playing on the opalescent walls merged into one another.

Selihe sighed. "If there was any other way, we would have taken it."

"There are a number of ways. You know me; you raised me from childhood. Any naga from this lake will have more powers than I." He was too young; that was the trouble, and he would not have centuries to learn the feats of manipulating water. He could fashion illusions that would trick many a mortal, and had the shape-shifting abilities all nagas were born with. Those were likely to be the powers he would die with. "If the king of Sasti has indeed stolen the Flame, he will have its powers added to those he already had. He will have the youth that comes from continual purification. He will be far, far stronger than I can ever hope to be. Why choose me at all?"

Selihe stopped, without warning, so that Daresh bumped into him. He assumed his human shape, and gazed serenely at Daresh. "Tell me: do you think I could pass for human among mortals?"

Daresh took in the other's slate-grey skin, the round, yellow eyes, and the telltale jewel shimmering in the middle of the forehead. "No." It cost him to utter that single word, but it was the truth.

"You are the only one who can take full human shape, because you were born mortal. Any of us would be noticed by the king if he entered the palace in that shape. And we do not age, but we can be killed all the same. We need you."

And how it must gall you, Daresh thought. That I, the inferior in every way, should be your salvation. "I won't be able to face him and win."

"Then do not face him. Deceive him; trick him."

Daresh measured Selihe's despair then. Nagas were honest, told the truth when they could. They were savage and unpredictable, but they seldom lied. That someone like Selihe would even consider deception was a sign that things were amiss. "Is it so bad here?"

"Look around you," Selihe said. "It has been a year since we were robbed of our heirloom."

The palace had dimmed, changed into something quite different from Daresh's childhood days. The wonderful walls shining with all the colours of mother-of-pearl now pulsed dully, with a sickly glow, and the water was murky. "It wasn't that way before," he said, slowly.

"It is dying." Selihe's voice was a whisper. "The city was built long before I was born, Daresh, but the Flame held together our buildings and kept our streets clean. If this goes on for much longer, the houses will crumble, and even the palace will disappear. And without the Flame, we cannot rebuild a city that will last, even in another lake."

Should I care? Daresh asked himself. *This is not my place*. But he could remember running through the streets years ago, marvelling at the colours swirling on the walls. It was in the days when everything was one more wonder to be discovered while he still had time, in the days before he grew too much aware of his fundamental difference with the others. Before he grew afraid of the darkness that waited for him, ever-patient.

"We are kin," Selihe said. "I know you do not like us."

You are wrong, Daresh thought. *I love you, old naga, I truly do, although I would never*

admit it to you. If only you could bring yourself to see me, not as something that must die too soon, but as a true being with the same emotions as yours. He shook his head. No time for dreams. No time for anything.

Selihe went on, "We are still the only family you can rely on. We cannot make you immortal—nothing can, not even the Flame—but if you ever need help, we will always be there."

"I know. Triad take me, I know." He sighed. There had never been any doubt as to what his answer would be. "I'll go to Sasti, and see what I can do."

Selihe smiled. But there was no joy in it. "Be careful, Daresh. Humans are blind, but all the same, if they should know what you are, they will tear you apart."

Daresh nodded. And *you won't help me. But I already knew that.*

As if he had read his thoughts, Selihe said, "We could avenge your death, but we are far away, and it would be too late when we arrived to save you."

"I'll be careful," Daresh promised. And wondered exactly how he would keep his word, for was it not the most reckless of things to enter a sorcerer's palace armed with nothing, and to hope to steal an object of incommensurable power from him?

* * *

Daresh rose in human shape from a stream near Sasti. It was near dawn, and the bank on which he emerged was deserted, so he had ample time to dress himself with the clothes he had brought, to steel himself before entering a human city. He had not been near a human being for more than three years, and had never in his life dared to enter a town of that size. For some reason, he found his heart hammering against his ribs, which was ridiculous. For the Triad's sake, he was wiser than most men within the walls of Sasti. Granted, he had not seen the gods nor received their wisdom, but neither had most mortals. He need only fear the king.

He shook himself—like an animal emerging from the water, he thought, darkly amused—and went in the direction of Sasti.

The city was a shock. Daresh entered through the main gate into what turned out to be a busy market. Everywhere merchants shouting the value of their wares; everywhere men and women in cotton tunics pressing themselves against one another, and the whole of it threatening to overwhelm him.

Daresh stopped before a stall to buy flatbread; biting into it, he felt the taste of cardamom and butter spread in his mouth. He almost spit everything out, but he forced himself to swallow, remembering that in the cities people ate things that were quite different from the simple fare of forest dwellers.

He somehow made his way within the throng, until he reached a jeweller who was displaying his merchandise on a woven mat. Under the merchant's sarcastic gaze, he chose a ring with an amethyst. He bartered for it, but was aware, as he rose, that he had been cheated, that he was not versed enough in the ways of mortals. Never mind. Money mattered little to him, as did most human possessions: it was the double effect of his upbringing in the lake and of his life in the forest.

Slowly, Daresh walked through the busy streets, going deeper within the city. All the while he kept his gaze on the sandstone mass of the palace rising ahead of him, caring little about the people he bumped into.

At the entrance to the palace a guard stopped him. "State your business."

Daresh, smiling the pitiless smile of nagas, raised his hand until the amethyst winked in the light of the rising sun: purple, the colour of suitors.

"I'll take you to the king," the guard said.

* * *

Ravanu, king of Sasti, had married late, and was old enough to have a daughter of marriageable age. That much Daresh knew. But the years—and something else, no doubt—had been kind to the king: the hair was free of grey, the skin of the face taut. The eyes, dark under raised brows, with a faint curiosity in their depths, now stared at Daresh. The overall impression was that of a benevolent father, and it was hard to conciliate that with the image of a power-hungry madman Daresh's kin had given him.

Appearances could be deceiving.

Daresh bowed, joined both hands in greeting. "I have come for the honour of attending your daughter's Choosing Day."

Something, a flicker of emotion, crossed the king's eyes. "You come with no chariot bedecked with flowers. There are no heralds in the streets to call your name, no retinue to crowd in your footsteps. You stand alone before me, with neither page nor cup-bearer by your side, and the cloth of your tunic is stained. What is your name?"

"I am Daresh." He held the king's gaze, dared him to guess who he was, what he had come here for. "From the forest."

"A hermit." Something in the tone made Daresh uneasy. "Very well," Ravanu said. "The Choosing Day is not before the next dark of the moon. In the meantime, like the other suitors, you will be assigned quarters in the West Wing, near the Hall of Private Audiences. You will have a chance to meet my daughter face-to-face in a formal interview, but she will be watching you before and after that, have no doubt of it. She will not Choose you if she does not know your true nature."

My true nature? If only you knew, Daresh thought. *If only you knew that I am here for your destruction, and that I will not rest until your ill-gotten youth is torn away from you, and the powers you stole returned to their true owners.*

* * *

His room was huge. It comprised an antechamber with two statues of gods facing each other as if to trap all visitors in their twin gazes, and a bedroom that was twice the size of his house in the forest. The furniture was gleaming with the red tones of mahogany wood; the walls were of white marble inlaid with patterns of coloured stone. On the table before the window lay a silver bowl filled with fruits, and a burning stick of incense was slowly discharging its sweet smell into the room.

Daresh picked a pomegranate, split it open with his bare hands. Red juice, the colour of blood, stained his fingers. He ate it absent-mindedly, scarcely noticing the taste, left the gutted rind on the table, and went to sit cross-legged on the bed. The mattress sagged under his weight; to Daresh, who was used to sleeping on a woven mat laid on the floor, it was a rather unsettling sensation.

He closed his eyes. He focused on his breathing, until he was aware of every muscle in his

body straining to remain unmoving. Then he gradually withdrew his presence from every limb, drew the core of his being deep within his chest, held it in his grip, quivering like a trapped bird, and released it abruptly. His consciousness expanded, seeped within the walls of the palace. It roamed within the gardens; searched every room; and found nothing.

Oh, to be sure, the Flame was there; Daresh could feel its warmth even in the privacy of his quarters, but he could not locate it. He knew it was within the palace of Sasti, and that was all. Some spell of concealment, no doubt, which he could not penetrate. He cursed his inadequate powers.

He withdrew his consciousness back in his body, and went for a walk into the gardens.

* * *

Daresh wondered for how long he would be able to keep up his pretence before something gave him away. He would have some liberty, for they would think him a hermit long since removed from the concerns of the world, but he knew he had to complete his mission soon, before he made a fatal mistake that would tell anyone he could not possibly have been raised by humans.

He needed to find the Flame quickly.

The gardens stretched behind the palace, a mass of pathways hidden under the branches of trees, of roads leading to fountains and wells. The smell of orchids filled Daresh's nostrils; he raised his hand to stroke the petals of one flower, and wondered where one could hide an object of power. With books, he thought. With the paraphernalia of a sorcerer. In the king's quarters, he would have said, but that was not private enough; too many servants passed through it daily.

A group of suitors—young men all, wearing princely clothes—bypassed him, with condescending smiles. They probably had not seen the amethyst, and thought him a servant. It did not matter. Unlike them, he was not there to court a princess.

He knelt before a well to peer down into its depths. There should have been a naga in there, but one of the king's first acts upon getting the Flame would have been to remove every supernatural being from his palace. The water felt dead. Was dead, with lichen invading the cracks between the stones, and algae spreading over the surface of the water below.

"What are you looking at?"

Daresh had been so sure he was alone that he almost lost his hold on his shape. He rose in a fluid, inhuman movement, whirled to confront the speaker, before he was aware that yellow had crept into his irises. He hastily re-assumed his full human appearance.

The girl who had spoken had taken a step backwards. "I didn't mean to frighten you," she said. He could not tell whether she had seen his eyes turn back to green.

"It doesn't matter," he said, looking at her. She was young—no more than eighteen summers, he would have said—with huge almond eyes quivering with the wary innocence of forest deer. He had the feeling that one wrong word would be enough to send her running away from him. She wore a brocade sari wrapped around her slim body; her skin was smooth, and her brows accented with kohl.

Princess Besri.

"I was just admiring your father's gardens, my lady."

She laughed, delightedly clapping her hands together in a childish gesture. "You guessed."

He was still staring at the perfect oval of her face, straight from a classical poem. "It

wasn't hard. They did say your beauty drove out the dark. I ought to have listened."

She pursed her lips. "I hate that."

"It's true." Daresh shrugged. "Make of it what you will." He made as if to turn away, but she stopped him.

"Wait!"

"My lady?"

"Come," she said, sitting on the rim of the well, and motioning for him to join her. He hesitated. He was not aware of the unspoken laws governing the behaviour of men and women, but he was reasonably sure that it was improper for a suitor to sit that close to the one he was courting, and bad manners to speak to a princess without a chaperone. "Come," she repeated, impatiently.

He gave in.

"You know who I am," she said.

"Yes," he answered. "I am Daresh." He raised his hand with the amethyst.

She shook her head, angrily. "I knew what you were already. Don't be a fool."

"I'm sorry if I offended."

"You didn't." She was staring at him with curiosity in her eyes. "Where do you come from?"

"From the forest," he said, curtly. He had no wish to confide in her. She was a child; more than that, she was the daughter of his enemy.

Princess Besri cocked her head, looking at him as if assessing his worth. "You're different," she pronounced at last.

"From whom?"

"The others," she said, sarcastically, "would have talked of the riches they own, of every jewel they would adorn me with once we were married. They would have boasted of the spread of their lands, telling me that you could stand in the tallest tower of their palace, and all as far as the eye could see would belong to them."

Daresh smiled joylessly. "I'm a hermit. I own nothing beyond the clothes on my back." He rubbed his forehead. "So I can't do that."

"It's more than that," Princess Besri said. "You wouldn't do it." Her assurance surprised him; so did her perceptiveness. He guessed she had lived a cloistered life, but he had expected her to be naïve and trusting. The wisdom beyond her age, coupled with the impulsive reactions of a child, was throwing him off-balance. It appealed to him. No. He could not afford to like her.

"Why did you come here?" she asked.

"There were tales of your beauty."

"No," Princess Besri said. "Don't give me that excuse. Everyone's already said that."

"Can't you accept that I might need a wife?"

"A hermit?" She smiled. "And you expected my father to accept?"

"The choice is yours."

"That's what they say. I know better. That's why he has the suitors come so early, so he can watch them, too, and make up his mind. He'll tell me who to Choose."

"You don't have to obey," Daresh pointed out.

She looked shocked. "He's my father. Why should I disobey him? He'll only want what's best for me."

"I see," Daresh said. He wasn't sure he did. "He is a powerful man, or so they say."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I've never left these walls. I'm the daughter of a king;

I'm different. The servants cannot look me in the eye, or they will die. The courtiers know I am reserved for some foreign prince and look upon me as one more thing they cannot have."

Daresh, thinking of his last years in the lake, when he had seen in every pair of eyes pity for what he was, remembering the suffocating feeling of isolation, the need to get away at any price, said, "It must be lonely."

Princess Besri said nothing for a while. At last she managed, "That's why I'd like to be married, even if my husband is an arrogant fool. At least I would step out of this place. I need to—" she burst, and then fell silent, as if she had said too much.

Daresh, filled with a sudden, sharp pity for this child, said—and surely it did not matter, if he gave just one piece of advice; it would lead to nothing, wouldn't it?—"It wouldn't be right."

"What would you know about it?"

"I know what feeling out of place is," Daresh said. "A bad husband is worse than anything. You'll belong to him in a foreign court where your only status will be as his wife. You'll be powerless."

Her eyes held his. She said, "I don't think you're right."

"As you wish. I was giving you some advice. You don't have to take it, nor do you have to believe every word I say."

The princess did not answer. Her eyes had grown thoughtful. She rose at last in a whirl of brocade. "I need to go. I have a sitar lesson, and I haven't touched the instrument yet. Perhaps we'll meet again." And she ran away from him without a word.

Daresh watched her go, not knowing the name of the feeling that made his heart constrict as he looked upon her retreating figure.

* * *

That evening, the king sent for him. Daresh, frightened that his talk with Princess Besri had become public knowledge, toyed with the idea of refusing. But he knew a king in his own palace could not be denied.

King Ravanu received him in the Hall of Private Audiences, an ornate pavilion the ceiling of which was held by fluted stone pillars. There was a throne on a raised dais, but the king was not sitting in it. Instead a mat had been spread over the floor; it held a bowl of steaming tea, and the fragrance of cinnamon filled the air.

King Ravanu was sitting cross-legged on the mat; he looked up as Daresh bowed. "Sit down," he said, with a paternal smile.

When at last they faced each other, they said nothing for a while. The king raised the bowl to his lips, drank deeply from it, and passed it to Daresh. He hesitated, before remembering the rules of hospitality; he drank also, feeling the taste of cinnamon slide down his throat, and put the bowl back on the mat.

"You sent for me," Daresh said, "and I came."

The king was watching him. "Yes," he said. "I did send for you. Do you know why?"

"No," Daresh said, truthfully.

"I am intrigued. Many men have come to court my daughter. All of them are princes from the neighbouring cities, or even from further away. All of them have riches to their names. I wonder why a hermit would choose to come into my court."

"Hermits must choose a wife sometimes."

"It is not the custom," King Ravanu said. "As I understand it, once a hermit has been Gifted by the gods, he remains celibate."

"It is not an absolute rule. And anyway I have not been Gifted," Daresh answered, rubbing his forehead as if he could make a naga-jewel materialise out of thin air. "My dreams are not of the Triad, and their wisdom is not mine."

"How long have you been in the forest?"

"Ten years."

"It is a long time for a hermit to remain under the canopy without having his vision of the gods."

Daresh shrugged, moving slightly away from the king. "It happens. Perhaps I am not worthy of such gifts." He knew, of course, that he would never be Gifted; such divine wisdom was reserved for humans, and even a mortal naga could not pretend to access it.

"So, will you leave the forest after you marry?"

"I see no reason why. The life there suits me. My wife would have to share it."

"I see," King Ravanu said. An awkward silence followed. The king reached for the bowl, took one sip of tea. "So you have spent ten years meditating. Your powers must be considerable."

Considerable? They were those of a child. A little shape-shifting, some talent for illusions. Nothing. "Not as considerable as yours." Daresh kept his voice even, infused the sentence with what he hoped was the right amount of disinterested curiosity. He was a naga; he was a bad liar, but the king was not paying attention.

King Ravanu smiled. "I am steeped within the mortal world. My powers do not take root in the forest; nor do they fade outside it. I taught myself by reading all the books of magic that I could find."

"It is said you did rather well," Daresh said, but the king needed no encouragement to go on talking.

"Through no effort of mine." He stopped, looked at Daresh for a while. Daresh could guess at the king's thoughts: can I trust him? He said nothing.

King Ravanu asked, "Tell me this, you who are wise beyond your years: have you ever heard of the Flame of the nagas?"

Daresh, who had been reaching for the bowl again, in a symmetrical act to that of the king, stopped in mid-air. He had been steering the other toward that revelation, but had not thought it would come that suddenly, that bluntly. "No," he said at last. He kept his emotions out of his eyes. And now I deceive him, he thought, just like a human would. He took the bowl, drank, swallowed, felt the warmth invade his body.

"There is an old legend," King Ravanu said. "About the creation of the world."

"I have heard this story."

"Not everything has been said about the creation. In the beginning, after the Triad had emerged from their lotus flower, and raised the lands of the world from the primal ocean, they woke up the snake Yesa, who had been sleeping coiled on the waters. Angry at being aroused, the snake opened his mouth and poured venom that threatened to engulf all of creation. To save the worlds, the Destroyer came forth and swallowed the poison, which is why all the statues of that god have a puffed throat.

"And the Creator went to plead with Yesa. 'Trouble not the land', he said. 'I will offer you gifts to placate your wrath.' He gave Yesa the souls of beings as yet unborn, to be shared among his descendants, and a portion of the essence of the Triad, in the shape of an ever-burning flame."

"The Flame," Daresh said, but he was thinking about the souls the Creator had given Yesa. The souls that would crop up, sooner or later, within the naga lineage, and make one child out of many mortal. What an irony; what a bitter gift, to know that one's time on earth was finite, that the darkness could not be held at bay forever, that one's eyes would one day close and never open again, one's acts and their repercussions fade from memory.

"Yes. It was later shared among Yesa's descendants, the nagas. And now every naga lake and river has a piece of the Flame. It keeps the waters crystal-clear, but it has other uses."

"I fail to see what this has to do with your powers," Daresh said. His voice was shaking now, but it seemed that Ravanu was too engrossed in his story to hear him.

"Simply this: he who holds the Flame has power. Not the power that comes from speaking the true name of a god, but power enough to hold demons and nagas at bay. Power enough to prolong life, if one should bathe in it every day to be purified of sickness and old age."

"I see," Daresh said.

"I grow old," King Ravanu said. "I have reached the age when death's footsteps echo my own, when every night I go to sleep knowing that I may not wake up in the morning. I would like to see my daughter cared for before I die. I would like to hold my grandchild in my arms and know that someone from my blood will rule Sasti. If I did not have the Flame, I would be dead before the year came to an end."

"I see," Daresh repeated. "So you stole it." He put in his voice all the accusations the nagas had not been able to utter.

"You disapprove?" King Ravanu asked. And, in the face of Daresh's silence, he said, "You are still young. To you death is but a faraway dream, a nightmare that the coming of dawn dispels. You believe yourself immortal, as we all do when we are young. But you fear death all the same. When you have reached my age you will understand that there is one thing that binds us all, whether we be rich or poor, kings or beggars: the knowledge that we will die, and the fear of that great unknown beyond the darkness—for, no matter what the priests tell us, there is no way we can be sure that something lies beyond the shadow, since no one ever returned from the dead. And if at the brink of death we could prolong our lives by a few moments, we would leap at that chance. If a dying man could think clearly, beyond the pain, nothing would matter more to him than a way to hold the darkness at bay.

"It is the shadow of death, and that longing to live but a moment longer, that unite all mortals, whether we voice that or not. In time you will learn that."

Daresh was silent for a while. The other's honesty called for nothing more than a true answer. He said, harshly, "I fear death. I, too, would think the same. But I would not act on it."

"Then I must congratulate you."

"On what?"

"On being wiser than me. Or more foolish, perhaps. I do not know. I bid you goodnight, Daresh, and wish you luck in winning my daughter's hand."

* * *

Later, when he was alone in his room, he thought about what the other had said, and knew that something had struck a chord. He looked within himself, and saw the same weakness. But he knew that what he had told the king was true: he might have had the same impulse, but he would not have acted on it. Thus, he thought, I am stronger. And wondered whether that

made him more or less human.

* * *

"You are different," Princess Besri said.

"You already said that," Daresh said. They were sitting under a young fig tree; the trunk had not reached its impressive thickness, but they still could sit side by side with their backs against the bark. She was wearing a perfume that Daresh could not quite identify; something close to musk, but not quite that.

Daresh was in a foul mood, because three days had elapsed since his conversation with King Ravanu, and he still had no idea of where the Flame might be. Each time he saw the king with his youthful face he had to fight the desire to shake the other until he told him where he had hidden it.

He could not sleep well. In his dreams the palace of the lake crumbled while he did nothing, and in the waking world he could not quite shake from his thoughts the image of the murky, lifeless lake shining under the sun.

His conversations with Princess Besri were one of the rare moments when he allowed himself to smile. But he remained aware, all the while, that he was not here to court her, that all he did was maintain his pretence of a hermit suitor. And the danger of playing a role, he knew, was that after a while you grew to fill your character, and that there no longer was a difference between the role you played and the person you were. I must not yield, he thought. I came here for the good of the Kin.

"I didn't mean the same thing," the princess was saying.

He raised his head, surprised. "I'm sorry. I was not paying attention."

Princess Besri made a face. "It's always nice to know someone's listening," she said tartly. "I meant that you are different because you don't fit in."

"I don't see what you mean."

She laughed. "It's obvious. You've been in the forest for too long, Daresh. You don't know anything about addressing a lady, or even about table manners."

"What if I don't?"

Princess Besri shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I find it funny, that's all."

"It doesn't make me laugh," Daresh said.

She was silent for a while. "Tell me about the forest," she said. "Were you happy there?"

Daresh, brought back into a world that now seemed a lifetime away, said, "Yes."

She kept looking at him; he finally understood that she wanted more than that, and added, "Imagine a canopy of trees high above you, like the roof of some huge building, with arches of green light that you'll never be able to touch. And never silence; there's always the cry of some animal, the roar of a waterfall hidden beyond the trunks, the wind whispering in the branches. You have a home in a clearing, by the side of a pool, and every morning you rise and look at your reflection in the water. And you know you could walk for days and days and never meet another human being."

"Now I see why you know loneliness," Princess Besri said.

Daresh shook his head. "It's not so bad. You get used to it. And the forest accepts you, after a while."

"How?"

"There are—gifts." He thought of the deer, slowly stepping out of the dappled shadows, and coming to kneel before him, until he could feel its moist breath on his face, and its antlers rested on his shoulders. He thought of the rainbow arcing above the pool in all its glory, with a thousand colours reflected in the quivering water. "You wouldn't understand."

"What makes you think I wouldn't understand? Because I've lived all my life in seclusion? I can think for myself."

"I have no doubt of that," Daresh said. "I apologize." It seemed he spent most of his time with her saying he was sorry for something.

She asked at last, "What made you go into the forest?"

"I—I didn't fit in with my people."

"It's a harsh thing to happen to anyone. Did they reject you?"

Daresh shook his head. "I chose to leave. I knew that there was no way I could ever bridge the gap that existed between us. Every face I looked at reminded me that I had been born different."

"Different?" Princess Besri asked.

"I was born—" he stopped, aware that he was on the brink of the revelation he could not make. "I can't tell you that."

"Why not? I won't tell anyone, I promise. I can keep a secret."

"It's not that."

"Yes, it is," she said flatly. "You don't trust me. Shall I tell my father what you told me? That there is something wrong that made you leave your people? He would throw you out of this palace."

"Princess."

"I am no longer a child. I am owed some measure of truth, surely."

"Not when it will harm you."

"All the more reason I should know, then. What if I Choose you, and you never tell me until I find out?"

"It won't happen. You won't Choose me," Daresh snapped. "Wake up. Princesses don't marry hermits."

"Why not? My father likes you. I can Choose you."

"I—"

"You owe me the truth," she said obstinately. "I'll get it one way or another. If you don't tell me, I'll go to my father."

Daresh, starting to panic, knew he could not let that happen. He could have told her a lie, except that he could not think of a plausible one. The only thing that sprang to his lips was the bare truth. "I was born mortal," he whispered, and it was as if someone else had taken control of his acts. "Among my people, it's a rare thing, like a disease."

"Your people?" She had moved away from him. "What are you, Daresh?"

"A naga," he said, soberly. Once you have started to drink from a cup you might as well drain it to the dregs.

"No," Princess Besri said. "Nagas are evil. They lie, they prey on humans. They deceive."

"Nagas don't. We only tell the truth. What you do with it is another matter."

"You're human."

"Am I?" he laughed, bitterly. "What makes you so sure?" He raised his gaze, and allowed his eyes to turn into those of the snake, for a bare moment. He saw in her pupils his reflection,

with his face distorted by emotions beyond the compass of mankind, and the unblinking yellow eyes. He saw her fear.

"No," she said. Her face had hardened; the fragile girl he had talked to was stripped bare of every courtly ornament, until only the core remained. And the core was steel. "Why did you come here, Daresh? You haven't come to take a mortal wife."

"It has happened before," Daresh said, rising. For a brief moment he towered over her, before she rose as well, locking her stare on his. "But I didn't come here to court you. I came looking for something which was stolen from us."

"You won't find it here."

"I know it's here. I can feel it. Your father stole an object of power from us a year ago, and has been using it ever since."

"I don't believe you. My father is not a thief."

"Princess Besri," he said, almost gently. "Almost everything you believe in is a lie. Ask him. Ask him where he hides the Flame. Ask him where he draws his power and his youth from."

She stood, as still as a statue of a god. "No," she said. "No." And then, savagely, "Triad curse you. I liked you." And she turned on her heels and was gone, running away from him, before he could hold her.

He said, to the silence in the gardens. "So did I, child of man. So did I."

* * *

He remained in his room for hours, worrying about whether she would reveal to her father what she knew, about how much time he had left before guards came for him. Logic said he should leave. But he had been entrusted with the safety of the lake, and no matter what he privately thought of the nagas, they were closer to him than anyone would ever be. He couldn't run now.

Beyond the windows of his room, the day turned to night; the shadows lengthened on the bed. He rose at last, in a fluid gesture, knowing the time for pretences was long past. He needed to search physically for the Flame, regardless of the risk of being found out.

The door creaked as he opened it; he looked around him, and saw only deserted corridors. All the other suitors would be sleeping by now. The night had laid its veil over the world, and only the inhuman walked under the light of the moon. Daresh, still in human shape, stole like a wraith within the West Wing, and came to the gardens. He stopped for a while, unsure of what to do next. The king's quarters, he thought, not for the first time. But King Ravanu would know the minute someone entered them.

He had no time left. He stood on the brink of discovery already. He shrugged, a careless gesture to himself, and entered the main area of the palace.

No-one was there. But there lay over the things that he saw a faint aura of power, clinging to every stone and every door, something indefinable that left a sharp tang in his throat, a longing for the lake. No. He had left the lake.

Door after door rose out of the darkness as he walked. Daresh, who could see in the dark, could not tell which one would hide what he wanted. The sense of the Flame was close, close enough to make him shake with convulsive shivers, but he could not locate it. He had the fleeting feeling someone was behind him, but when he turned he saw nothing but darkness, endless shadows engulfing one another. He was too worried. The true danger lay before him.

Voices broke the silence ahead of him. He froze, then made for the shadows. They seemed to be going further away, but he recognised one of them, without doubt. King Ravanu.

Daresh inched his way forward, holding his breath until his chest hurt. He dared not even call on an illusion for fear that Ravanu would feel the spell. He was powerless.

The king was followed by a servant, who carried a lantern. He was speaking in a low voice, and Daresh could not hear anything, but he thought King Ravanu's face looked more haggard than usual, and that age had crept across the features.

He followed them at a distance. More corridors, more closed doors. He slipped from shadow to shadow, keeping his eyes on the light ahead.

He saw King Ravanu stop. Not yet, he thought. I can't be discovered yet. He flattened himself against a wall. "Someone is here," the king said.

The servant raised the lantern. "There is no one, my lord."

King Ravanu cupped his hands, until a pale glow shone between his palms. Daresh, seeing the reflection of the Flame in the flickering fire that the king held, backed as if he could merge into the wall.

"I can feel someone," King Ravanu said.

Daresh willed himself to be still, willed his breath to cease, his heart to stop beating. It is death if he finds me. He could not move. He dared not move.

But his eyes were drawn to the Flame, to the power it represented. It had sustained the city in the lake since its founding. It had, in a way, raised him to adulthood, so he could be there, waiting for the king to discover him. He could see every detail of the dancing light, every twisting pattern. Lines of fire writhed in the air before him. He was drawn into it, into its heart.

It welcomed him. He felt his awareness expand within the confines of the Flame, until the image of an underground room crowded with bookshelves filled his thoughts. He felt a fragment of the powers that King Ravanu had stolen suffuse his whole being, and, before the impression of tremendous strength faded, before the king realised what was happening and wrenched the Flame away from him, he called up an illusion of shadows and threw it over the other's eyes.

Daresh came back into his own body, shaking. For a moment he looked into the dark eyes of the king, which held no expression, and wondered whether the other had felt the explosion of power.

"There is no one," King Ravanu said at last. He sounded puzzled. "Let us go."

When the light had vanished, Daresh moved, cautiously. He knew, long before he had reached the corner of the corridor, that they would be gone, and so it was. Vanished, both of them, without a trace.

He went back to his room, and slept without dreams.

* * *

He woke up. It was still night, but the sky held the faint light that promised dawn. The moon had set, and a single star shone over the banyan tree at the center of the gardens, like a sign from heaven.

Gods have no interest in nagas, Daresh thought, wryly, but all the same, he stood watching that star until the first light of dawn had drowned its glow.

He had an image that might mean something, or nothing. A room with books, underground, seen within the Flame. An illusion, or something that was real?

He was of the lake. The Flame had known it, but the king was still its master. He could still feel the ethereal presence, as he had felt it since his entrance into the palace, but nothing more.

There had to be a way. A way into that room, so that he could claim the Flame for his own before the king knew what he had come for. All it would take was his touch. The Flame would know its own.

There had to be a way.

He could find none. He spent the day in his room, feeling increasingly depressed, knowing he was running out of time, and that there was no solution to his problem. The Flame had been too well hidden.

He must have dozed off at some point in the evening, because he started with a jerk when someone knocked frantically on the door. He rose in a heartbeat, put his hand on the handle, and found himself facing Princess Besri.

For a while neither of them spoke. Her hair was in disarray, and her sari, inadequately wrapped around her body, trailed on the ground. The kohl over her eyes was smudged, as if she had had to apply it herself without a mirror. She was breathing in quick gasps.

"Come in," he said at last, to break the silence.

She shook her head. "You come."

"Why?"

She was shaking. "You'll understand."

He followed her out of the West Wing, into the royal quarters, past the corridors where he had roamed only the previous night. She stopped before a life-size sandstone statue of the Destroyer that stood at the end of a corridor. The god's eyes were wide open, with a compassionate expression, and the puffed throat, painted blue, reminded Daresh of the legend King Ravanu had told him.

She laid a hand on the statue's chest. "Show me the way," she said, to the still eyes above her. He could not see what she did with her fingers, but the god somehow seemed to recede into the background, leaving a dark path ahead of him.

"The password is 'Avendra'," she said. "It was my mother's name."

"You followed your father."

"Does it matter?" Princess Besri asked. "Go, and take what you came for. Before he comes back."

"I—" He sought for words, found none. "Thank you."

She was weeping, he saw, but he had no idea how to comfort her. "Go."

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The darkness rose around him like a shroud. He turned back, one last time, and saw her standing, framed in the light of the corridor, but she was already too far from him to matter.

Daresh turned, and walked on. Shadows flickered, at the edge of thought, coalesced around him.

"Who are you, to dare enter this place?" The voice, low-pitched and inhuman, echoed everywhere around him.

He did not answer. The path ahead of him did not change; it could have been seconds, or centuries, before he reached its end. There was nothing. He stood as if on the edge of a chasm, and looked down, dispassionately. In the depths were all that mankind feared: the sickness and old age, the forces man was powerless against, the greatest darkness that came for them all and

made a mockery of love and kin.

I am a naga, he thought. I *was raised by those who do not know the meaning of those fears. I am a naga.* But it was hard, all the same, to remain there, hard to forget that he was mortal.

"Who are you, to dare enter this place?" the voice asked, again.

"I am Daresh," he said.

"What is the word? Say it, or you will fall, and the fall will have no end."

He hesitated, then. Besri was the daughter of Ravanu, and her first loyalty was to her father, no matter what he might have told her or what she might have seen. *What other choice do I have?* he wondered, dryly.

"Avendra."

No answer came from the darkness. But gradually it faded away, to reveal a set of huge wooden doors, carved with hundreds of twining plants. The plants themselves were receding, withdrawing their tendrils in a migration of wood, until two smooth panels faced him.

Daresh did not move. Finally, tentatively, he laid his hand on the wood, felt the doors swing away from him, and entered the room that he had seen in the Flame.

* * *

It was exactly as he had imagined it; the books lined on the shelves were of sorcery, and the usual mass of wooden bowls carved with spells, of incense and rare herbs cluttered every table. Pillars of obsidian held the dome-shaped roof, and no light came from outside.

In a daze, Daresh walked deeper within the room, hardly noticing his surroundings. He picked a plant: Kusa grass, so sharp it could cut a man's throat. He remembered Selihe's lessons: place it below a sick man's pillow and the sickness will depart. Such small magics, he thought, laying the plant back where he had found it. As if they made any difference.

But, in the centre of the room, lay real power: the Flame, lighting every wall with red reflections that danced on the bare stones. It was as tall as a man, and continually bent as if in some invisible wind, as if still feeling the breath of the Creator who had given it away.

Daresh approached it cautiously. Every fibre of his being yearned for it, but he knew that to be hasty was a death-wish in those places. There would be wards against intruders. There would be traps.

But there were none. He had gotten within three steps from the Flame when he heard King Ravanu's voice.

"Daresh?"

He stopped. He could have gone on, but knew that he would have died. He turned, slowly, met the king's gaze unwaveringly.

"I had not thought you would wish to gaze upon the Flame," King Ravanu said. The voice was still puzzled, but it would not be long before the king realised the only reason Daresh could be there.

Daresh shook his head. "No. The time for pretences is long past. I came here as a thief." And, so saying, he took his naga shape, and stood near the Flame, transfixing King Ravanu with the yellow eyes of the cobra.

But the king was no ordinary mortal, to be frightened so easily. "A naga? That is impossible. No naga can take a human shape."

"I can," Daresh said. "And I come here to claim what is ours."

"I could crush you with a thought."

"Yes," Daresh said. He did not move, but every muscle of his body tensed.

"You fool," the king said at last. "I liked you, for all that you were a hermit without possessions in this world. I would have given you my daughter's hand in marriage, and in time you would have ruled the city of Sasti, and the Flame would have come to you when I died. What are a few years to an immortal?"

"Too much," Daresh said. "The lake is dying because of what you did."

"Why should I care about what happens to nagas?"

"I care," Daresh said.

King Ravanu shook his head. "What a fool I was, thinking that you could understand me when I spoke of mortals' fears."

"Not so much of a fool," Daresh said. The air was as still as before a storm. He was of the lake, born of water, and knew the feeling well enough. Which explained why, when the first tongue of fire lashed from the Flame, he had already moved away, and the fiery tendril grasped only empty air.

"You cannot hope to win," King Ravanu said.

Daresh, panting, stood behind a pillar, listening to Ravanu's footsteps. *All I need is a diversion*, he thought. He waited for his heartbeat to slow down, tapped within the core of power at the center of his being.

He did not need to see to know that the Flame had disappeared, and that five identical copies flickered all around the room.

He heard the king laugh. "Do you think you can fool me with such childish games?"

No, Daresh thought. *I had not hoped I could. It was worth a try all the same.*

He dismissed the Flames, and stepped from behind his pillar. The king had not moved from where he stood, near the open doors. Between Daresh and the only exit.

Daresh closed his eyes, and mentally called on the gods. Being a naga, and a mortal one at that, he had never been much of a worshipper, but he was going to need every bit of help to survive.

An army of nagas, ghostly at first, and then gaining on more substance as Daresh fed them more of his strength, coalesced from the shadows. They all had Daresh's face.

Daresh had time to see the surprise on King Ravanu's face before he was drowned within the multitude of false images. It was a strain to maintain all the illusions, a strain to keep all of them moving so he could hide his own movement, stubbornly toward the center of the room, to touch the Flame. All I need—he thought, gasping—is one moment.

Lines of fire writhed within the room, passed through simulacra of Daresh. He kept on moving. He saw a tendril leap for the chest of one of his illusions, allowed it to fade. He had his eyes on the Flame.

One moment more—

A tendril of fire wrapped itself around his arm. He cried out, in pain, and tried to disengage himself from its grip, but he could not; the Flame held him fast. The images wavered, fell still, and vanished.

King Ravanu shook his head. "Is that all you can do? I wonder why they sent you at all, Daresh."

Daresh had managed to free himself from the tendril. He stood, shaking, watching the king. "There was no other to take my place," he said, and laughed bitterly. "You've won."

King Ravanu raised his hand, and Daresh felt the power of the Flame rise in the room, rise until it filled him to bursting. He longed to lose himself within it, but there was no way he could hope to deflect that strike; he was not strong enough to wrench the Flame from the king, he was mortal—

"Father. You can't kill him," Princess Besri's voice said. Daresh's eyes flew to her. She stood, shivering, between the two open panels of the door, dwarfed by the masses of wood. And she was walking towards her father, running now, and in her hand she held a small, sharp dagger such as they gave to women for their own defence.

King Ravanu's eyes went to her, and back to Daresh. "Another of your illusions," he said, wearily. "Is there nothing you will refrain from calling?"

Daresh felt the power turn away from him, focus on the princess. As if in a nightmare, he knew the exact moment when the blade of light arced from the heart of the Flame towards her chest. He shouted, "It's not an illusion," but even before he had completed his scream, the king saw it.

His face went pale. His mouth shaped an inaudible word, but it was too late, there was no calling back the arrow once it had been shot, no putting back the thrown knife into the scabbard.

Daresh was gliding over the floor, sliding through the folds of suspended time as if he could yet make a difference. Too late, he thought, and then he saw King Ravanu move.

The king did the only thing that could be done; he stepped into the path of the light, and Daresh felt once more the impact of power as King Ravanu tried to shield himself from his own weapon.

It hit him in the chest. He reeled, fell, and in that moment Princess Besri screamed. The sound echoed under the dome and took on a life of its own.

Daresh could no longer think. His eyes were filled with the king's fall, but some older, colder part of him turned his steps aside, and he glided towards the Flame.

He touched it.

Instantly it rose to fill him. Its radiance sustained him, steadied him. He felt all the strength of the lake, and the knowledge of nagas, and all the powers he would never have—his, for as long as he would stand within the Flame. He slid forward, and the Flame followed him, like a halo surrounding his whole body.

He left the center of the room. Princess Besri was kneeling, cradling her father's head in her lap; the king was still breathing, but Daresh knew it would not be long before the eyes closed forever and the body grew cold. When he passed near her she raised her gaze. There was no expression in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, for want of better words.

"You don't belong to them," she said. "You don't belong to the lake, Daresh."

"Then tell me where I belong," he said, savagely, wreathed in the otherworldly radiance of the Flame. He saw in her eyes his own reflection: the cobra hood framing the impassive human face, the yellow eyes, the fused legs coiled on the floor. "Here?" His glance took in the empty room, the still figure of Ravanu.

"I don't know," Princess Besri said, shaking her head. "You don't belong to the lake."

Though his heart seemed to have turned to ice, he said, "Let me help you."

For a moment, she said nothing. "No," she managed at last. "Go back into the lake, Daresh, if that is where you think your path lies."

"Princess—"

She was still looking at him, and he could think of no other words to make her forgive him. He left her with her father amidst the useless paraphernalia of the room. He did not look back, not once. His eyes stung, but it must have been the Flame that made the world bend around him in hundreds of planes of blurred light.

* * *

Over the lake, the moon had waxed and waned since Daresh's return. He sat with Selihe in a room of the palace, and spoke of the future.

"The Elders are grateful to you for what you did." Selihe said. "With Ravanu dead, there seems to be little chance of the Flame being stolen again."

Daresh, sitting cross-legged on the floor before the other, watched colours creep across the far wall. He said nothing.

"It must not have been easy."

No, Daresh thought. *I lost something, coming back. Perhaps what they say is true, and that whoever is touched, even in a small measure, by the gods—and the Flame had sprang from the essence of the Triad, after all—is forever changed. Or perhaps something else touched me.*

Staring at the jewels on the walls, at the patterns whirling on the floor of mother-of-pearl beneath his legs, Daresh felt like a stranger to the place.

You do not belong in the lake, Princess Besri had said.

No, he thought. *I never belonged here.* Not in that palace where each thing was the fruit of centuries of work, where each object spoke of powers he would never have the time to master. There is a kinship around mortals, King Ravanu had said, before Daresh betrayed his trust. It is the shadow of death that binds us all.

"If you would like to stay here awhile..." Selihe said. "My house is yours, and there is much I would like to discuss with you. I have not seen you for such a long time."

"I'm sorry," Daresh heard himself say. "I cannot stay."

"Are you anxious to return to your forest hermitage? I could visit you there if you prefer."

Daresh shook his head. "I'm going back into the mortal world."

Selihe's face changed expression in an eye-blink. The fathomless eyes were puzzled, an expression Daresh had seldom seen on a naga. "The mortal world? What could you possibly hope to find there, Daresh?"

"I don't know. But it's where I have to go."

"You do not have to."

"No," Daresh said. "But I wish to."

"I should have seen," Selihe said after a while. "Is it the girl?"

"Perhaps."

"She cannot understand you. Her mind is bound to the world she was born in. And she may be pretty now, and a delight to your eyes, but like all humans she will grow old, and her beauty will fade. Her laughter will be smothered by sickness, her carefree manners be drowned by old age."

"It will happen to me exactly the same way," Daresh said. He looked at Selihe. "You never saw that, did you? None of you ever saw that but my own mother, and she turned away from me without breathing a word. I was born different. A tiger can't hope to change its nature; nor can I ever be anything else than a lamb raised by wolves. You can't draw me into your world even if

you tried. Everything around me speaks of knowledge and power deeper than a human lifetime. You don't change, you can never change. I will grow old and my hair will grey and fall and still your face will be that of the day of my birth."

"Daresh—"

"I know," he said, spent by his outburst. "You're only trying to be as kind as you can be to a flawed member of the Kin. But you'll never make me feel at home here, and my place isn't in the forest either."

"You will not find what you are looking for in the cities of men."

"I don't know what I'm looking for. All I know is that it's not here."

Selihe was silent for a while. "I cannot hold you."

"You never could."

The snake's eyes, yellow, unblinking, rested on his face for a while, moved into the distance, staring at some unseen landscape. "No. I can advise you; I can offer you pity or love, but I will not decide for you, nor force on you my will, although I could if I so wished.

"Go in peace, Daresh. You have my blessing, for what it is worth, and should you ever long for your own kin, the Lake will still be here."

"It will always be here," Daresh said, without bitterness. He rose, watched a shoal of fish cross the room. "Thank you," he added, holding the other's gaze. Selihe's eyes held the unfathomable wisdom of one who had been born at a time when gods still walked the world. He did not speak, and Daresh went away without a word.

* * *

He rose from the cistern at the back of the palace.

With the loss of the Flame, the spells over the palace had disappeared, and all that remained was a faint taste of power, a mere reflection. In human shape, he crossed the length of the gardens, and went to the well where he had first met the princess.

She was there, standing by the well as if to peer into its depths. She had her back to him.

"Princess," he said, but she did not move.

"Daresh," she said. Her voice held back tears.

"I know that there is nothing that I can say that will make things right."

She turned. Her eyes were red with weeping, the kohl over her brows had run down her face in rivulets of black, and her skin held a pallor akin to death.

He bowed, slowly, keeping his eyes on her.

"No," she said at last. "There is nothing that you can say that will bring him back."

"I am truly sorry."

"You already said that."

"There is nothing else I can say that you would believe," Daresh said, coming closer to her.

She was silent for a while, but did not move away from him. "I feel so—lonely," she said at last. "I've sent the suitors away; they would not even wait until he was cremated to start courting me."

"I can leave," Daresh said, although it cost him to say so.

"No." But nothing more was said.

If I do not speak now, Daresh thought, *all the way I've come since I left the lake will be for nothing*. But the words he knew he had to say seemed to have become stuck within his throat. It

took an effort to utter each of them.

"Do you think," he asked, "that one day you will forgive me, and allow me to attend your Choosing Day?"

Princess Besri's huge eyes held him, for a while. "I don't know. But I can try." And she smiled, weakly. To Daresh the smile, no matter how slight, was like grace descended from heaven, a gift from the gods themselves to him who least deserved it.

And he knew, without a doubt, no matter the difficulties he would have to face, the unspoken grievances that would have to be forgiven, the trust that would have to be re-established, that this was where he truly belonged.

The End

Aliette de Bodard is a fantasy writer who moonlights as a student in Applied Maths (a cunning way to hide her taste for mythology and fairy tales). This story takes place in the same universe as "The Triad's Gift" (Deep Magic #45). Her publications include works in Deep Magic (Feb 2006), Shimmer, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, and Fantastical Visions IV. Visit her website at http://perso.wanadoo.fr/aliettedb.

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